

**Smithsonian Institution
National Museum of American History**

**Philanthropy Initiative
Oral History Project**

**Interview with:
Richard (Rip) Rapson
Kresge Foundation
Troy, Michigan**

**Interview conducted by:
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Segment 1 of 2

AMANDA MONIZ: This is Amanda Moniz conducting a National Museum of American History Philanthropy Initiative Oral History interview with Richard Rapson of the Kresge Foundation. It is June 15, 2017, and we're at the Kresge Foundation Headquarters in Troy, Michigan. Can you please state your name and place of birth?

RICHARD RAPSON: It's Rip Rapson. I was born in Bonn, Germany.

MONIZ: Bonn, Germany. What took your family to Bonn?

RAPSON: My father was a practicing architect and had moved to Massachusetts in the late 1940s to serve on the faculty of MIT. He was recruited by the State Department to do some of the early design work for American embassies in Europe. So he from about 1950 to [00:01:00] about 1954 did the American Embassy in Sweden and in the Hague and in Copenhagen and a lot of American consulates and other work in Europe. I happened to just sort of pop out when he was doing work in Germany.

MONIZ: How long did you live in Europe?

RAPSON: I ended up spending I think the better part of a year in Germany. Then my mother and father moved back [00:01:30] to Boston. I was in Boston for another year or two, and then he was recruited to the University of Minnesota.

MONIZ: So you were how old when you moved to Minnesota?

RAPSON: We moved to Minnesota in 1954, so I was just a couple of years outside of Minnesota. He then stayed at the University of Minnesota for the next 30 years, so I grew up there before going off to college and doing other things.

MONIZ: Can you tell me about your [00:02:00] family a little bit more?

RAPSON: My father was born and raised in Michigan so always sort of brought a mid-western sensibility, and it was forged in great part by time he spent with Eliel Saarinen at Cranbrook in the mid 1930s. He was recruited into the second class of designers and architects at Cranbrook [00:02:30] at a time when it was sort of a hotbed of creativity with Charles Eames and Henry Bertoia and a lot of the giants of mid-century modernism in America.

He spent four or five years working with the Saarinen Architectural Office in the pre-war era, and then went on to both a practicing and teaching career that landed him at the University of Minnesota for the better part of 1954 to [00:03:00] 1984. It was important I think, because he became deeply embedded in the Minneapolis planning and architectural community. He was the first chair of the Minneapolis Planning Commission that was created in the late 1950s.

So our household was a place where there was a lot of conversation about community, a lot of conversation about place, a lot of conversation about community forum. [00:03:30] And it pretty much was with me from the time I could remember through the time I went off to college and to pursue my own career.

On the other hand, my mother was not trained in anything in particular. She had a general liberal arts degree, but ended up developing a deep interest in community [00:04:00] development systems of all things. She started the first community development corporation in Minneapolis in the late 1960s.

It was a very small little operation that she and three of her closest friends would purchase houses that were in decline in transitional neighborhoods in Minneapolis, put their own sweat equity into it and then resold them back at their cost to families to encourage [00:04:30] families with small children to stay in the city.

It was a very simple, interesting, early attempt to create a different kind of financing system for community development. They ended up doing only probably eight or ten properties, but it was again, one of those things that was talked a lot about at the kitchen table.

So between my father's interest in planning and design and architecture and my mother's interest in community and helping stabilize community, it was a pretty heavy dose early [00:05:00] on for a young person of what constitutes a healthy and vibrant community.

MONIZ: So you learned from them about what makes a community healthy and vibrant. What did you learn from them about philanthropy?

RAPSON: That's an interesting twist. I realize it so often, I sort of inter-braid the concepts and public service and philanthropy. And I probably should be [00:05:30] more intentional about separating the two, but I think there are such strong parallels between people who are working in the public realm,

and people who are seeking to give back to community through private financial philanthropy or dedicated time.

Because in many ways, what my mother and my father were doing were just dedicating their personal time. They weren't people of means, particularly, but whether it was my father serving on an unpaid [00:06:00] planning commission post or working with small community partners to help create neighborhood-based plans. Or my mother essentially turning around houses simply to put them in the hands of young families. They never made any money at that.

It was a sort of a form of philanthropy. It was a form of helping the community pursue improved outcomes by the dedication of their time and their talent. It was never so much a question of [00:06:30] our participating in institutionalized giving. It was much more how do you create a sensibility around community service.

As I think back now, with the luxury of 30 years of hindsight, I think that was formative. I think it gave me a sense that philanthropy in many ways, is sort of the undergirding of public service. It's a commitment to trying to dedicate resources to the improvement of folks' [00:07:00] life chances who often don't have the resources themselves to get ahead.

MONIZ: Let me ask you another question about your childhood. Was religion a part of your childhood?

RAPSON: Not so much. My father was a Baptist and my mother was a Catholic. So never the twain shall meet. It was very funny. My father had been married in the 1930s, and his marriage broke up. So [00:07:30] when he moved to MIT, there was this young assistant to the head of the school of architecture who was sort of lying in wait for him. And they hooked up fairly quickly.

But because she was a Catholic and from a very devout, deep Catholic family, her family would have no part of the union with a divorced man. So they actually eloped to New Hampshire and were married by a justice of the peace. My [00:08:00] mother's side of the family refused to see me until very late in their lives. My grandmother, just before she died, called my mother and asked her to have me come and visit.

I think as a result both my mother and my father soured a little bit on organized religion, and we ended up sort of touring from one place of worship to another. I would go to a Catholic service on one Sunday and to

a Presbyterian one on another and to [00:08:30] something else on another. But there was never so much the infusion of a religious basis for the kind of work and the kind of sensibility that they developed.

MONIZ: I'd like to shift now to talking about how your career has developed. You began your career working as a congressional staffer. Could you talk about that experience?

RAPSON: I'd be happy to. [00:09:00] If I could though back up just a hair. When I was in high school, it was in Minneapolis, sort of a normal kind of working class public high school. A couple of things happened that in many ways I think contributed to this layering up of a sense of public responsibility.

First, Minneapolis was ordered by a federal district court judge [00:09:30] to integrate its school system. I was attending a school that was going to be sort of the front lines for that first wave of integration. We sat right on the edge of one of the poorest neighborhoods in north Minneapolis.

So the kids from north Minneapolis, predominantly African American kids, were bused down to our school, which was a very traditional, working class, middle class families. There was enormous tension, and I was asked early on, [00:10:00] for all sorts of different reasons to help mediate some of those tensions.

I was sought out by the principal and actually by the district superintendent to create a series of working groups and to pull together both a student community and parent set of committees to try to help the district figure out how to cope with these very complicated issues of race and separation and integration.

[00:10:30] For the better part of two years, I headed up a project, a process, that called on students and parents and faculty from all across the Minneapolis school district to try to help the district prepare and adjust better to the really complicated, tension-filled integration of the schools.

Looking back, it's sometimes I think, hard to remember how difficult that [00:11:00] was in the late 60s. It was a time of such social disruption generally, that when you layer onto the war and onto the emergence of the feminist movement and the social justice and racial equality movements, this sort of physical, very concrete in time set of tensions around integrating public school systems. It was quite disruptive.

So for me, it became a first and important [00:11:30] exposure to how you manage through a really complex social change. Not that I was any position to make decisions, but our recommendations in this work resulted in a series of 25 or 30 recommendations from open campus to free speech to racial relations training, all sorts of things.

It ended up being taken quite seriously by the district, and they actually took our recommendations and wrapped them into [00:12:00] school district policy. So it was more than just window dressing. So when I begin trying to think after college what it was I'd like to do, I'd initially thought that I would stay in Washington, have a traditional trajectory of working for a congressional office for a long time, going to the forward service. Who knows what that path might [00:12:30] have led to?

I realized that at some point ... I was working in the Congress. I'd worked there for four years serving as a liaison between the Washington office of a representative from Minneapolis named Don Fraser and the local office. So I was doing a lot of shuttling back and forth, and it reinforced for me, I mean together with I think that high school experience and sort of my family's upbringing, that place was really important, that I needed to go back to [00:13:00] a place where I felt connected, where the scale of potential impact might be higher.

I found Washington a fascinating, but ultimately dislocating place. It wasn't clear what the place was about. It was people kind of coming in, coming out with each administration. The temperament of the place changed and even though there was a permanent bureaucracy and social service, again, it was just an impetus for me to think about [00:13:30] what it looks like to work locally.

So I went to law school in New York City and revisited that whole conversation. Just as I thought I shouldn't stay in Washington forever, I thought, well, I could stay in New York in this big complicated place where people kind of get swallowed up. Or I could return to the place I had roots, so made that decision.

I'm not sure that fully [00:14:00] answers your question, but it was, I think, a set of early career decisions that were rooted in my family's history, rooted in my own personal history growing up in a complicated high school environment, and it dawning on me that if I were to take my legal training, take my interest in political work, that it probably had to be grounded in a place.

MONIZ: Can you talk a little bit more about your high school experience? Do [00:14:30] you know why you were chosen to lead this?

RAPSON: I think there were a couple of reasons. First, I was the president of something called the All City Student Council. We had 13 high schools in Minneapolis, and they each chose a representative to sit on an All City Student Council. It was sort of a part of the times. In the late 60s, there was sort of a sense of student activism and student engagement. So I chaired this largely [00:15:00] formalistic body of high school students talking about the big issues of the time but without any particular set of authorities.

But when the desegregation order came down, the superintendent I think was looking for some way to create a direct connection into the energies and sensibilities of the student body to help manage change. And he looked around, and here I was [00:15:30] as the president of the All City Student Council.

So he said, you're in as good a position as anybody to figure out whether there aren't a half-dozen students you could pull together to lead this effort. So I think in some ways it was the positional opportunity that being the head of the All City Student Council afforded.

I also had gotten to know my principal at my high school well, and I think he thought reasonably highly of me. Again, [00:16:00] he had tapped me to help in that particular high school, manage some of the tensions of the integration work. So I think those two things probably ended up propelling me in that direction.

MONIZ: Can you talk a little bit more about what that work was like? In as much detail as possible, the feel, the smell, the sound, any details you can add would be great.

RAPSON: It sounds a little bit antiseptic in the retelling. It was actually [00:16:30] deeply tension-filled and difficult because this is 1968, '69, '70. All of the protests coming in the wake of the federal assassinations, the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, movement toward militancy on college campuses was beginning to spread into high school campuses.

Our school, for example, had invited Angela Davis, a former Black Panther, [00:17:00] to speak on campus, and the administration of the district had denied that request. So the racial tension that was bubbling up

because of the desegregation order coupled with the zeitgeist of the time made high school campuses oddly very tense places.

I mean there were fights in the halls. There were [00:17:30] threats that people would be coming in large groups to disrupt athletic events, social events. Dances were suspended because of the potential threats of violence. It seemed a time where it was just difficult to find common ground. It's eerily reminiscent of what we have now.

I don't mean to [00:18:00] overstate the importance of this little student committee I was asked to form, but it actually ended up becoming disproportionately important because we must have had 50 meetings. We would go to student council meetings at high schools throughout the city. We would meet with parents to talk about issues of free expression and whether student newspapers ought to be able to publish what they wanted to publish. Or whether they ought to be censored by the central administrative bodies.

[00:18:30] We had difficult conversations about simple things, about whether there ought to be open campuses, whether students ought to be permitted to leave the campus for lunch or to run errands. It seems again, so basic now, but then you couldn't. You couldn't leave the school grounds, and part of it was motivated by these tensions that were generated by the co-mingling of races who hadn't really dealt much with each other, at least in Minneapolis.

[00:19:00] The anxiety level was very high. The tensions were very high. And I very vividly remember, even these many years later, walking into classrooms filled with teachers and parents yelling at the students because they were so angry that we were talking about free speech and free rights of publication and open campus and medical care and medical clinics on sight. I mean all of these things became these trip wires [00:19:30] for very difficult adult conversations. They were very threatened.

I remember thinking as a junior or senior in high school, whatever that is, 17 years old, having these adults yell at you in a public forum was really disorienting. And when we were simply trying to develop a set of ideas and possibilities for the district superintendent.

In some ways, it was an extraordinary [00:20:00] privilege to be able to create that kind of process on behalf of students from across the district. On the other hand, it was traumatizing because it was a tough time with deep divisions. I think at the end of the day, our little project, which ended

up being reported extensively in the newspapers and in the public media, ended up being a strangely important bridging process.

We actually were able to [00:20:30] create a student bill of rights and responsibilities that ended up becoming adopted wholesale into the district's policies. It touched all of the topics we had been talking about, open campuses, free speech, rights of student publication, disciplinary proceedings, all sorts of things. It was a fascinating experience for a 17 year old.

MONIZ: It sounds like it. Let's jump ahead then. You went to Washington. Then you went to law school in New York, and then you moved back to [00:21:00] Minneapolis. You worked in private practice. One of the things you did was work as a lawyer to nonprofit boards. Can you talk about what sort of contribution you make as a lawyer to nonprofit boards?

RAPSON: The first couple of years of a young lawyer's life is a pretty steep learning curve. Particularly coming out of a law school like Columbia, which was rigorous [00:21:30] and kind of all-consuming. There wasn't a lot of time at Columbia to do dedicated community service or to figure out how to become enveloped in community.

So when I came back to Minneapolis to practice law with a corporate firm, my early conversations with them had a lot to do with whether there was some room for even a starting attorney to find outlets of service in [00:22:00] community. And when I was interviewing different firms, one firm in particular jumped off the page.

It was a firm called Leonard, Street, and Deinard, and the three founders, Mr. Leonard, Mr. Street, and Mr. Deinard were all east-European Jews who had fled in the Nazi era to the United States with very little support, no family here. And basically [00:22:30] had created lives.

The Deinards were actually two brothers, the older of which was blind. He had gone through Harvard Law School and Harvard Graduate School and gotten both a PhD and a law degree while blind and had graduated number one in his class. So this transcendently gifted man who brought with him this extraordinary experience of [00:23:00] having fled the troubles of Eastern Europe and Europe generally during the pre-World War II era.

So they created a law practice that from the get-go was about excellence in the law to be sure, but was also about trying to figure out how to give back to community. They, for the first 20 or 25 years of their existence, had

developed this reputation for doing extraordinary community [00:23:30] service, particularly on behalf of the Jewish community because these all three were Jewish. But also helping with some of the city's leading cultural and educational institutions. It was a really impressive body of work.

When I interviewed, I was going to be, I think, the 30th person on the letterhead. One of [00:24:00] the very few non-Jewish people who would be part of the practice, but felt almost immediately comfortable in this environment of social service. It just really was deep for them.

So the first two or three or four years of law practice, I did what any young lawyer did, learn a craft and just work ridiculously long hours trying to do that. But always with an eye for whether [00:24:30] there might be ways of applying some of my legal training and just my personal energy to community work.

Early on the firm was very supportive of picking up clients who couldn't otherwise pay. We represented the Mental Health Association of Hennepin County. We represented a young woman who had been incarcerated against her will in a mental institution and was trying to figure out whether a juvenile [00:25:00] had any rights of self-determination in fighting against parents who had placed her there. We represented small arts organizations. We represented small environmental organizations trying to protect, in one case, a lake from a very aggressive form of industrial development.

It was actually quite an extraordinary list of projects that began building over the [00:25:30] six or seven or eight years I was there. I think by the time I ended leaving the practice, I was putting in as many non-billable hours as I was billable house. And I say that less in a self-congratulatory way than with a profound respect for any corporate law firm willing to have one of their young partners that's made a partner dedicate this amount [00:26:00] of that firm's time and energy and money to the kinds of causes that needed representation that it couldn't possibly hope to pay.

I also was able to accept a couple of public appointments at that time. The mayor of Minneapolis was Don Fraser, the man I had worked for in the Congress. He had come back to be mayor after losing a Senate race. Right about the same time I went to law [00:26:30] school, he ran for Senator Humphrey's seat unsuccessfully. So he was convinced to come back to Minneapolis, run for mayor and was elected.

He had asked me to serve on a couple of public commissions. I was also selected to be on the Minneapolis Public Library Board. It was actually an elected library board, of all things. It was only one of two elected library boards in America. I think Cambridge was the other one.

But they had someone leave the board, and so they had to [00:27:00] choose a successor. So I ended up serving on the library board. My mother had been a librarian and done a lot of work with the children's library collection at the University of Minnesota. This, kind of way down in my DNA somewhere, I found issues of literacy and access to learning to be a powerful motivator. So I served on that board for six years.

I had, I think, in my background through the [00:27:30] time I spent at the law firm a really heavy dose of community connection. Whether it was through this pro bono work, or it was through these public agencies I was serving on or through the library board and watching the power of a public institution like a library shape a community.

It was at a time when Minneapolis was changing dramatically. It was becoming much more diverse. We were seeing waves of immigration from Southeast [00:28:00] Asia, from East Africa, from South America and Mexico. And libraries became a place of first democratic resort to those folks.

It was actually more than just sit and figure out what new books you were going to buy. It was how do you use community libraries in particular, or the central library. But community libraries in particular as a way to help a community manage change.

I don't [00:28:30] mean to overstate it, Amanda, but I think in retrospect this thread of helping communities think about change, manage change, without being presumptuous about it. I mean I was a very small part in all of this, but it was one of the things that I found highly motivating and where I felt my skills could be helpful.

MONIZ:

What I'm also hearing from you is that over the course of your life, from the time you were a young child through high school and [00:29:00] then early in your career, you were finding people who were mentors who could help you pursue your interest in community development. I'm wondering if you particularly identified anybody as a role model or were particularly seeking out mentors, developing a relationship with mentors.

RAPSON:

That's such an interesting question. I think [00:29:30] as you ask it, I think the answer has to be yes, even though I'm not sure it was a conscious seeking-out at the time. I mean I don't know if a parent is a mentor, but those are very powerful role models.

I mean my father was dragged into a number of the most difficult controversies facing a young developing city like Minneapolis in the 1960s. He [00:30:00] was the head of the planning commission during urban renewal. And he fought tooth and nail against urban renewal policies. All sorts of stories I could tell you.

In the late 1960s, he was asked by the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development to do the first new in-town, new-town project. There was something called the New Towns Project coming out of HUD where they would create new mixed-use, mixed-income developments. But they tended to [00:30:30] be on the suburban edge.

They asked my father to design the first one inside a city, and it was the Cedar Riverside Project that involved multi-income, multi-racial housing, very complex stuff. It was deeply controversial. He was sort of thrown into these deeply controversial issues. So it was just, I think, [00:31:00] the role modeling of community change management and community engagement with all of its upsides and downsides, I think was really clearly modeled by both my mother and my father.

When my mother was doing her early community development work, the little CDC she developed was just run by these three 60-year old women and didn't use union labor. They did a lot of their own work. Two of [00:31:30] their houses were burned down, and the very strong suspicion was that it had been done by union activists who resented their non-unionized approach to the work. I don't know if that's true. I don't mean to be slanderous, but she believed it fully.

But I think the work in the high school community sessions was clearly driven by both the high school principal who was quite strong and quite a visionary [00:32:00] guy. He ended up going onto a distinguished career in higher education. And a superintendent whom to this day was I think regarded as the strongest superintendent the city has had. And he did take a personal interest in me.

I mean our little working group of five or six students would meet with Superintendent Davis at least once a month and often more frequently. And he would sit with us and talk to us about the process and help us

understand how we could problem solve more effectively. So I think you're right. [00:32:30] They're a clear mentor.

When I went to work in Washington, Don Fraser was everybody's prototypic stand-up guy. He had deep integrity, deep interest in policy and permitted us to I think really watch him very carefully, and how you can kind of put policy first rather than politics first. So think he was definitely a mentor. I think you're [00:33:00] right. I think up to this point it was not so much my seeking these figures out, but having the enormous privilege of being able to associate with them.

Then when I was at the law firm, there were three or four senior lawyers who were the founding members of the firm who took me under their wing and protected me essentially. It would have been easy for them to just say, "Do your job and after you make partner in year seven, then you can do some pro bono work around the edges." Instead, [00:33:30] they permitted me to stand front and center at the firm and develop a pro bono practice.

MONIZ: What were the names of your principal and superintendent in high school?

RAPSON: The principal's name was Byron Schneider, and the superintendent was Superintendent Davis. What is Superintendent Davis's first name? He was always such a formal figure. I'll think of it in a moment, but it was D-A-V-I-S.

MONIZ: [00:34:00] Okay, so then you had this time at the law firm, and I know you spent time at the Design Center at the University of Minnesota. But I'd like to move onto talking about when you became the president of the McKnight Foundation. Can you talk about what it was like to become a foundation president? First I guess, talk about why you pursued that.

RAPSON: We won't spend a great deal of time with [00:34:30] the Design Center years. After I had been practicing law about seven or eight years, I got a call from the mayor saying that his deputy of almost a decade was leaving, and he wanted to replace her with a deputy mayor. In Minneapolis, they had only one deputy mayor. Other cities have multiples. This is sort of the mayor when the mayor's not there, chief of staff.

It was an important role, and Don Fraser [00:35:00] had not only watched my work in Washington when I had worked for him for four years but had also worked with me on a couple of these public commissions I mentioned earlier and decided that that, in combination with my legal training,

because he was looking at a couple of revisions to the charter and wanted someone who was generally familiar with issues of law and policy to come and run his office.

To be able to move out of the law firm [00:35:30] to the mayor's office was a big jump. I mean I thought in many ways I would do it just for a couple of years and then come back to the law practice. I mean being a partner in a major corporate law firm was a big accomplishment, and I was proud of it and felt that that was what I had been trained to do. But that if the mayor of a city calls you and asks you to serve, that's something you ought to do.

So I went with every intention for staying just a couple of years and then resuming law practice. Well I stayed four, and the mayor [00:36:00] decided he wasn't going to run after 16 years of having served. So I ran for mayor, and that didn't work. That's another whole conversation.

I mean it worked in the sense that it was a terrifically energizing, fun, constructive mayoral campaign. I ran against three or four very qualified, decent candidates, and the woman who won was the president of the city council, a good friend of mine, the first African American woman mayor in the city, Sharon Sayles [00:36:30] Belton. So in many ways, I sort of had my cake and eat it too. I ran a fun campaign, lost to someone who was going to do a good job, and we all ran campaigns that were deeply filled with integrity and energy. It was just a great experience all around.

Back into your question, it left me with a decision of, "then what?" Did I in fact want to go back and resume my practice of law? And [00:37:00] that's where I think public policy gets into your water system or into your blood stream a little bit because corporate practice, even in the four years since I had stepped out of it, had become an even more competitive, more money-driven practice.

And despite all of the extraordinary virtues of Leonard, Street, and Deinard, where I had been practicing, they had to pay the bills just as any firm did. So when I talked to their [00:37:30] managing partner about coming back, it was clear that it'd become more business oriented. That my latitude to do the same level of community service I had in the past would probably be a little bit more constricted. That they, because of my public sector experience, were hoping I could help develop a lobbying practice, which really held no appeal to me.

So for lots of reasons, it didn't seem like the right choice. [00:38:00] About the same time, I was approached by the McKnight Foundation President. He said, well while you're thinking about what's next, would you be willing to take some of the work that you've done in the mayor's office and apply it to aging suburbs of the Twin Cities? You've talked a lot about how you revitalize community.

We created something called the neighborhood revitalization program while I was in the mayor's office. We restructured the budget office. We created a new set of models for service delivery [00:38:30] almost like a SWAT team where you create clusters of agencies to go in and help create problem-solving strategies.

And he said could you think about what that looks like in suburbs that don't necessarily have the same resources that the center city does, but who are facing the same issues of racial polarization, income decline, aging infrastructure and the like. So I said sure, and I spent a couple of months writing up [00:39:00] a series of ideas and papers and reflections on those questions. And he said, this is really interesting. Would you be willing to turn this into a larger project?

That really called the question of was I going to go back and practice law? Was I going to try something completely different? Or might I try this as an intermediate stage until I figured out what really suited me. The nice thing was the McKnight Foundation gave us enough resources to pull together a project [00:39:30] that involved geographers, economists, architects, planners, and others to work on these issues of aging American suburbs. And I ended up doing it for almost six years.

It was a fascinating project, and we worked both locally and nationally. We constructed a whole suite of national conversations around this topic, and it was becoming an increasingly hot topic because more and more older suburbs [00:40:00] were in fact looking at some of the pressures that center cities had faced for a long time.

I mention all of that because when the McKnight search came up, I had no formal philanthropic background that would have necessarily qualified me. But I think what they were attracted to was I actually had experience in different sectors. I had [00:40:30] been essentially in the private sector in a private law practice. I had been in federal government. I had been in local government, and I had been in the academic world.

So the qualities that each of those represent for philanthropy I think became powerful to them. They didn't say it this way, but after I was chosen in fact, I sat back, and I thought you know in many ways, philanthropy is [00:41:00] reflective of those four different sectors. It's a little bit like the academic sector in that it has the privilege of taking a very long view and being integrative, trying to find connections among things. And that's not a privilege accorded to many in our community.

It's a little bit like a private sector that it has private capital. It can move against societal problems with money, and it probably in some ways has more discretionary money [00:41:30] than most private sector actors.

It's a little bit like the public sector in that it has multiple tools. It can convene. It can commission research. It can work with community organizations. It can make grants. It can make loans. In many ways, it's like public sector firing on all cylinders. And it's deeply connected to the nonprofit sector because it's focused at least in large private philanthropy, on people who have been marginalized or ideas who have been marginalized.

[00:42:00] So I've thought subsequently to my having taken the job at McKnight, that philanthropy is this interesting hybrid. It sort of shape-shifts. Sometimes it acts like an academic institution. Sometimes it acts like a private investor. Sometimes it acts like a public sector player, and sometimes it acts like a nonprofit player. And in many ways, it's at its best when it combines those qualities.

[00:42:30] So I'm not sure that the McKnight Board would have articulated it quite that way, but there was something appealing about someone who had had local public experience, federal public experience, academic experience, and private sector experience. I actually believe, I'm sorry I don't mean to sound self-serving, I actually believe it stood me quite well. I think being able to draw on those different experiences became in many ways, what helped define my early work at the foundation.

MONIZ: [00:43:00] Can you talk a little bit more about what that work was?

RAPSON: When I arrived at McKnight, I followed a brilliant nuclear physicist. A guy named Michael O'Keefe, and Michael was really good at constructing technical programs. He had created a crop research program that worked with [00:43:30] institutions of agricultural research all across the world. And it was a fascinating program in which McKnight invested in orphan

crops in Central America and different kinds of harvesting techniques in Africa. It was really brilliant.

He similarly created a neuroscience program kind of closer to his expertise in which he gathered many of the great neuroscientists and researchers from [00:44:00] all across the world into a concentrated program to try to advance different parts of the field. He created a Mississippi River program that focused on improving the water quality all along the stem of the Mississippi.

I inherited a really high-functioning set of technical programs. What the board though, was struggling more with was some of the softer tissue work. [00:44:30] How do you deal with kids and families? How do you deal with communities in transition? How do you think about aging suburbs? This was again, the work that McKnight had commissioned for me.

So in my first couple of years at McKnight, I tried to help the board understand that these questions of place-based philanthropy ... Because McKnight is place-based funder, even though it has a neuroscience program, and a crop research program, and a Mississippi River [00:45:00] program that spans multiple states, it's fundamentally about Minnesota.

I'm sorry, the other thing I inherited was a very sophisticated program of rural philanthropy. McKnight had some 15 years before that, created a set of investments in community-based work all throughout rural Minnesota to help [00:45:30] a struggling rural economy get back on its feet. It's a brilliant program.

So I thought, well what can we do that would supplement that, that would move more toward these soft tissue issues of kids and families. We began slowly helping the board understand that we ought to develop the same kind of formal approach to early childhood development, out of school time [00:46:00] programs, regional development in the twin cities, place-based work in the poorest communities of Minneapolis and St. Paul.

And it really took us the better part of two or three years to build out those programs. But I think by the time I left six years later, McKnight had a very well-rounded suite of activities that were not just these technical, scientifically-based programs of water quality and [00:46:30] neuroscience and crop research.

But also, I think had become known as a regional and in some ways national leader on thinking about issues of regional economic development, regional planning, place-based interventions for low-income families and low-income community stability. It was a very impressive program.

MONIZ: The way you've just talked about your work at McKnight suggests that your understanding of being a foundation president [00:47:00] is that the primary responsibility is engaging with the board, or at least that's a paramount part of the work. Am I hearing you right?

RAPSON: Absolutely. McKnight was fascinating first exposure to organized philanthropy because it's a family foundation. This is the family that descended from William McKnight who was for all practical purposes the founder of 3M. A brilliant entrepreneur on most lists [00:47:30] of the 10 great entrepreneurs of the 20th Century.

His daughter, Virginia McKnight, had been given the charge late in her life, in her mid-60s to essentially create a philanthropy as a tax-planning device for all practical purposes. So she selected her pastor, a guy named Russ Ewald, to help her do that and to move it beyond just [00:48:00] checkbook philanthropy of giving to her favorite causes. And Russ did a brilliant job of creating this real initiative of doing a lot of systematizing of the work. He had a small staff of probably under Russ, it was never more than five or six.

That then led to Michael O'Keefe, his successor, the nuclear physicist who built out these technical programs, which led to me. And I think in [00:48:30] that evolution, the board became more and more important. With Virginia and Russ, it was all about Virginia. It was the daughter of the founder, so Russ could ... manage is the wrong word. No one would manage Virginia Binger, but it was a mutuality of purpose that was natural to them.

Michael, I think, struggled a [00:49:00] little bit with the board. He was such a brilliant guy, and he had such strong views about these very technical issues of crop research and neuroscience and water quality that he in many ways created things, and the board followed. By the time he moved on, it was clear to the board that they wanted someone to work more [00:49:30] hand-in-glove with them.

So we did. We developed a process of strategy development and strategy stewardship that involved them deeply because it was a relatively small

board of maybe 10 people all of whom were family members. We ended up bringing on an outside family board member later, and since then they've expanded it to go beyond family much more extensively.

But at the time [00:50:00] it was this somewhat delicate balance between how do you create a board that feels deeply engaged in the work, at the same time you've brought on a professional staff of some 25 people to bring expertise and systematization to the work. So I think there is always a tension with a family board of is it the family's operation, or is [00:50:30] it an operation that is a professionalized, philanthropic enterprise guided by the good sensibilities and ideas of the family.

I think the McKnight board did a good job of maintaining that balance. After I left, I think they've moved even more closely to the model of trying to balance their responsibilities as good stewards of [00:51:00] money that is no longer theirs and maintaining a family sensibility and a family sense of vision and construction.

I think among the many lessons I take away from McKnight is that you don't work despite your board. You work with your board. And it's so easy, I think, to overstate this, I think a lot of folks in the nonprofit and philanthropic world think that boards are there to be endured. [00:51:30] It's necessary governance, and it's necessary under the tax code and all sorts of reasons. But essentially, this is about the staff.

I don't believe that. I actually think that the McKnight board infused a sensibility, a sense of decency, a sense of legacy that was inseparable from the essence of the foundation. Now that's not always easy for an executive because sometimes the [00:52:00] points-of-view are different. Sometimes the board can believe that the work is getting too far from them. That it's becoming too professionalized, too bureaucratized, and that's probably true.

But I think it's that constant calibration, and when I came to Kresge, and maybe a different set of questions. But when I came to Kresge, I think even though it wasn't a family board in the same way that McKnight was, it was an enormously important lesson to carry [00:52:30] because my board has been here at Kresge, just an unequivocal blessing. They have been smart and appropriate and balanced and good stewards of the resource and genuine partners in the way our work has evolved.

MONIZ:

Let's shift then to talking about your work at Kresge. You came to Kresge in 2006. Can you talk about what [00:53:00] it was like to go from a large

foundation, but a somewhat smaller foundation to a larger more expansive foundation. Then to shift its mission.

RAPSON:

When I got the call from a woman named Susan ... That's terrible. I'll think of her name. The search firm from Minneapolis, [00:53:30] looking ... Spencer Stewart. So it was Susan ... I guess it doesn't matter. I'll remember later, but Spencer Stewart called me and said, "Would you be interested in talking to the Kresge Foundation? They're making a transition."

And I said, I don't think so. I think Kresge, from what I know of them, is pretty deeply committed [00:54:00] to capital projects, to trying to create a fundraising method in institutions that help them finish these capital projects. I'm not sure I would be very good there. It's just not the kind of work that I know. It's a little bit formulaic for my taste.

Susan Boren, B-O-R-E-N was the search firm. So Susan said, and she was from Minneapolis. I knew her, [00:54:30] just socially and otherwise, professionally. And she said, Look Rip. You have very strong view of philanthropy that's been honed at McKnight. You talk a lot about this sort of cross-sectoral qualities that we talked about earlier.

Why don't you just come and talk to them. Give them a different view of what philanthropy might be and just sort of see where it goes. If it's not of interest to you or to them that's fine, but you've at least given them an opportunity to look at philanthropy a little bit differently. [00:55:00] She said, I just think that would be a good service. It would be a courtesy to them.

So I said fine. I'm happy to do that, and I'll try to be as respectful as I can. I don't mean to disrespect what they do, it's just not maybe a fit.

So I walked into a room of eight of the Kresge trustees and had a couple of first impressions. One is that they were very impressive. There was nobody [00:55:30] from the Kresge family there. They did have one Kresge family board member, but these were 11 outside directors including the president of Columbia University, the president of a Fortune 500 company, on and on. Very, very, good.

And the very first question was, "If you had to critique what [00:56:00] we do, how would you do that?" Which was not at all what I expected to be asked. Then after a series of dances around that, and I talked a little bit about this notion of the four qualities that philanthropy could have. This notion of the academic and the private and the public and the nonprofit

qualities, and how I felt in some ways maybe Kresge was underutilizing those.

Really just to recapitulate, [00:56:30] in many ways Kresge was not taking a long-term view. It was not looking at things holistically. It was looking at a transaction in time, which was a building campaign. And once the building campaign was done, it moved on and didn't have any sense of how that building campaign might relate to broader issues of an institution's evolution.

It used one tool. It didn't use many tools. It used a capital challenge tool. [00:57:00] It took kind of no risks, on and on. I kind of laid out, as politely as I could, where I felt Kresge was suboptimizing its leverage as an institution thinking that if I could be polite, at least it's a different point of view.

But then there was a whole second set of questions around Detroit. At that point, in 2006, I mean Detroit was everybody's poster child for urban dysfunction. Whether [00:57:30] it was in terms of public leadership or whether it was just the decay of the place or whether it was the flight of capital to the suburbs. I mean it was just on and on and on.

And I turned to them, and I said, "Before I answer this question, how serious are you about it? Are you asking kind of out of curiosity of an outsider of what I think of Detroit? Or are you asking whether you believe philanthropy could actually make a difference in Detroit?"

[00:58:00] And that got Lee Bollinger's, the President of Columbia's, attention. So he and I had this relatively brief conversation, but interesting conversation about whether philanthropy could make a difference in a place. That's where kind of my cumulative history kicked in, and I said, "Absolutely." Whether it's the work I did in the mayor's office or the work I watched my family do, or whether it was the work that McKnight did, there is absolutely a place [00:58:30] for place-based philanthropy.

Well so what I realized was I was getting drawn into the questions. They were clearly serious about retooling the broad purposes of Kresge from a less formulaic, algorithmic kind of approach to building buildings to something broader. And they were clearly interested in trying to understand what their role and place was.

So we had a second interview, and I [00:59:00] kind of got drawn more and more in. And I think they became kind of more and more intrigued. So

by the time the third and final interview came around, we were actually much more engaged in conversations about how might this look different. Where do you see the opportunities? And it was sort of an interview, but it was more kind of the opening steps in a larger dance around how might we retool, how might we reimagine the possibilities of this [00:59:30] philanthropy.

So by the time they selected me, they actually chose me a little bit earlier than they had planned. And I had like a six-month window before my predecessor, John Marshal was going to leave. I think they made the decision in December, and he wasn't scheduled to leave until June. So the board and I arranged that I would spend six months, not all of it, but some of it touring around and asking the same question they had asked of me of other people in the field.

So I talked to all of the folks that [01:00:00] I knew from McKnight, all across the country about how would you change Kresge. It has this strong signature in the field of capital challenge, grant making, building campaigns. What are the possibilities? How do you think about changing philanthropy's role in place.

So long, long way of saying is that I used the six months to just have tens and tens and tens of conversations with folks [01:00:30] from the nonprofit field and the philanthropic field and the public sector about what's the ideal state of philanthropy. What do you imagine philanthropy could do in a tough place like Detroit and given this long legacy of giving.

By the time I arrived then in June, I sort of had a blueprint. So we moved as a board, very quickly to try to understand whether that was a blueprint that they would be comfortable with. And to their enormous credit, they said yes. [01:01:00] And I evolved. I did one of my goofy drawings called Tiers and Baskets. Tiers, T-I-E-R-S. Can I just say a word about that? Because it became formative to our conversation.

MONIZ: Yes, please. Please do.

RAPSON: Very early on, not so much in June or July or August, but I think in September, we began having more serious conversations about the possibilities of redesign. So I drew this drawing on an 11x17 piece of paper with this [01:01:30] little box. And it was Capital Challenge Grant. And I said, this is what you do sort of at the bottom of the page.

And I said so we've talked about how that maybe too restrictive of the kinds of aspirations you'd like to really have impact both on an institution or on a field or on a place. So why don't we take that box and stretch it horizontally and think much more about not that particular form of capital, but the spectrum of capital [01:02:00] that you might apply to institutions you care about.

It could be planning capital. Should a building be built? Should we change the direction of a place. Organizations often don't have that kind of capital available to them. Pardon me. It could be working capital. It might be a human service organization that wants to expand to do more housing or to do more health-related work. I mean people again, often don't have that kind of flexible capital.

It could be a building project capital. It could be endowment [01:02:30] capital. Once you've built your building, how do you build the endowment? Or it could be new and different innovative forms of accessing capital, lending, running businesses. I mean lots of options. So I said, "Kresge ought to be really good at that. Right? So maybe a very first step we could take would be to stretch this capital spectrum and make it a little bit more flexible in terms of the kinds of support that we make available to organizations."

I said, "And the minute you do that, it seems to [01:03:00] me that you have to ask two more questions. One is are there any particular values that you want to elevate. I mean how will you choose? Anybody can come to you for capital, a hospital, a museum, a social service center. Don't you want to have some values that you place on the equation."

And they said, "Well we kind of do." I said, "No actually, you kind of don't." You make your selections based on whether an organization is fundraising ready. You have this [01:03:30] little capital pyramid that says you have a handful of big gifts at the top and a bunch of mid-sized gifts in the middle, and the bottom of the pyramid is all these individual donors. That's what Kresge was trying to create incentives for.

I said but you don't really ask, is it innovative. Is it having a broader community impact? Is it green and sustainable? Does it serve low income ... You don't ask any of those questions. Could we at least [01:04:00] identify a handful of values that wouldn't necessarily screen people out, but you would put on the equation, that you would put on the balance.

And I said second, I think it's probably time that we understand that capital is different in different fields. That human service capital is almost always funneled through county units of government. Health capital almost always comes through a different set of mechanisms. Arts funding comes through ... You know, [01:04:30] on and on and on.

I said, so it just seems to me that as we stretch this capital spectrum, we want to ask what is the context, and what are the values. So we did that. We began creating a list of values, sustainability, low-income impact, broader community impact. And we began trying to understand whether the capital needs of an arts organization were exactly the same as a health organization or exactly the same as a human service organization.

Then I said, so that's your first tier, but the second [01:05:00] tier then becomes if you actually are looking at the different fields, and if you actually are looking at a value structure that you're trying to affect, maybe then you actually want to go a little bit deeper into the field and say what are the needs of the health field. Is it more emergency rooms clinics at Harvard, or is it more community-based delivery of service to low-income people? Is it more expansion space [01:05:30] for art collections, or is it more community outreach into low-income communities on the part of arts organizations?

Why don't we at least ask the question. Let's take the six areas in which we have traditionally worked and traditionally made capital challenge grants, arts, higher education, human services, the environment, community development, and I'm missing one, but one other. And ask whether there aren't things that the field itself really [01:06:00] is suggesting are emerging as priorities. And that's sort of your second tier.

So the first tier is the stretch of institutional capital, the more creative use of institutional capital. The second tier, a little bit higher above is where the fields might go, and whether there aren't some field-building investments we might make. And then the third tier is are there places in which all of those things come together. Where we ought to think about our health investments and our human services investments and our environment investments (environments is the sixth) and [01:06:30] the arts and culture work.

And I said the answer to that is quite clear, isn't it? It's Detroit. So we have these tiers of work. Institutional at the bottom, field in the middle, place-based at the top, and you have these baskets of work around subject matter expertise. And when you put all of that together, you get tiers and baskets.

And that became this simple organizing principle almost right out of the box. We adopted that I [01:07:00] think in September of 2006 and began building it out pretty quickly.

MONIZ: You just mentioned the drawings you do, and other people have talked about it. Can you tell me a little bit more about how you developed your visual thinking, and how it helps other people deal with these issues, conceptualize these issues?

RAPSON: When I was at the Design Center in the mid [01:07:30] 1990s I guess, I was asked to come to a meeting at the Casey Foundation. This guy named Ralph Smith I had met who was the vice president at Casey, and he wanted to get the 40 top experts on youth policy in the room to talk about what Casey ought to do in its next generation of strategy around kids and families.

And I'm not sure why he had me come, but I had done a lot of youth policy ... Well actually, now that I think about it, we [01:08:00] had done a lot of youth policy out of Mayor Fraser's office, and the mayor had really made kids and families his signature work. So I think he wanted me there to observe and help, so I sat there.

And about half-way through I realized that with 40 leading experts, all of whom were kind of prima donnas, the conversation was just going around and around and around, around, around. So I took out a big piece of paper. It was a big 11x17 piece of paper. I don't know why I had it, but I took it out and started just [01:08:30] trying to sketch the conversation because it was repetitive. So I thought well, let's just map it out and just try to make coherence of it.

And like hour six into this meeting, Ralph looks over, and he says, "What is that?" And I said, "Ralph, with all due respect, it's the only way I can make sense of this conversation." And he said, "All right. We're going to take a break." So we took a break. He looked at it. He had me explain this drawing. And he takes it out to the copying machine, makes 40 copies and passes [01:09:00] it out. And we came back, and he said, "All right. We're not going to organize the rest of the conversation around this drawing." What is new? What is clear? What is not clear?

And fascinating, really almost the first time I had begun doing this, and I think the second impetus was that at the Design Center, the head of the Design Center at the University of Minnesota was a guy named Bill Morrish. And Bill [01:09:30] is this brilliant conceptual thinker who can't

write his way out of a bag but is a brilliant drawer. And he had developed almost an iconic way of drawing places and houses. I mean just wild. So he would take these big concepts and put them onto paper.

I watched Bill very carefully and tried to figure out how my funny little just simple drawings could be animated by [01:10:00] more visually appealing gestures. I mean pictures of things, not just words with little arrows the way so many people do. Bill actually would create spatial drawings, where you could actually watch an argument move on the page. It's hard to describe, but anyway.

So I think it was the combination of the Casey sort of forcing me onto a visual note-taking page. Then Bill giving me [01:10:30] basic tools because I can't draw. It's terrible. I have to copy things. If you told me to draw your face, I couldn't do it. Or to draw a microphone, I couldn't do it. But once I get a little toolbox, I can draw a cloud. I can draw a house. I can draw arrows. I can figure out how to shade.

So increasingly, at the Design Center I would do these drawings for our aging suburbs project. Mostly process drawings. [01:11:00] If we're going to have a conference, what are the eight stages that we need to have the conference. So I could draw little tables of people, and I could draw books, and I could draw megaphones or whatever it was. Very simple iconic stuff.

But Bill would say, if you did it this way, it actually would be more effective. So it was actually like having a teacher, and people say well it must be your father because he was a brilliant [01:11:30] architectural draftsman. But it wasn't. It was this combination of a couple of experiences.

Now that I think about it, I actually think what I've always been comfortable with is synthesizing complex things into simpler constructs. I think it's just because the way my brain works. I need to make things simple. My memory isn't as terrific as other people's. [01:12:00] I don't carry with me the mental capacity to have 113 concepts swirling around a meeting table. I have to make things simple.

So I was often asked to mediate disputes because you could kind of distill to the essence a conversation and say all right, what are we really talking about. What are the four or five things that are really animating this conversation? What are the three or four things that we could do that would push the conversation to a next level? [01:12:30] Law school,

mayor's office, my early work at McKnight, I mean a lot of that kind of comes from this need to synthesize.

I think when the need to synthesize is combined with a physical depiction, it's got to be simple because it has to fit on an 11x17 page. So it became over the years, a more and [01:13:00] more refined process to the point where I did very little of this at the beginning of the Design Center. It grew. By the time I hit McKnight, actually when I interviewed for the McKnight job, I actually drew them a process of where I thought their reform might take them.

Then at McKnight I continued with sort of earlier versions of the tiers and baskets at McKnight and other things. It just sort of grew and grew and grew.

MONIZ: I know that we're almost out of time.

RAPSON: Oh sorry.

MONIZ: I would love to follow up and continue the conversation at another time.

RAPSON: Of course.

MONIZ: This is fascinating. There's more I want to hear about your philanthropic career. So could we leave it at that? That this is part one, and we'll keep talking?

RAPSON: I'd love to. It's been fascinating. I'm sorry if I've taken you into territory you didn't intend.

MONIZ: No, not at all. It's been a terrific conversation, and I really appreciate how much time you've given me in hearing about all these different aspects of your career and your life.

RAPSON: Well it's a pleasure. Thank you. No please, I hope if you can make the time, I'd be delighted.

MONIZ: Terrific. Thank you. I will then.

RAPSON: Okay. Thank you.

MONIZ: All right. Thank you.