

**Smithsonian Institution
National Museum of American History**

**Philanthropy Initiative
Oral History Project**

**Interview with:
Darren Walker
President, Ford Foundation
Detroit, Michigan**

**Interview conducted by:
Amanda B. Moniz, Ph.D.
David M. Rubenstein Curator of Philanthropy
National Museum of American History**

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Segment 2 of 2

AMANDA MONIZ: This is Amanda Moniz conducting an oral history interview for the Smithsonian's Philanthropy Initiative Project with Darren Walker the president of the Ford Foundation. It's August 22, 2017, and we're at the Ford Foundation Headquarters. This is the second of two oral histories.

Could you please state your name and birthplace?

DARREN WALKER: Darren Walker. Lafayette, Louisiana.

MONIZ: Thank you.

I really appreciate your making the time to speak with me again. When we had spoken before you had talked a little bit about your role in Detroit's Grand Bargain work rebuilding ties with the Ford family and with Detroit and your thoughts on the importance of Henry Ford, but we didn't have time to discuss those topics fully, so I really appreciate your making the time to talk again.

When I had asked you about your proudest achievement, you had said you were proudest of your work in Detroit. You also mentioned you were very gratified by the reconciliation with the Ford family. Maybe we could start by talking about Henry Ford. Could you tell me how you've gotten you know Henry Ford? Through reading books, talking with family members, consulting the Foundation's archives or other ways.

WALKER:

I have gotten to know Henry Ford though reading history, not really the archives of the Ford Foundation, because Henry Ford was not a particularly great philanthropist. He, in all honestly, because it was Henry Ford's son, Edsel, who actually signed the charter creating the Ford Foundation and provided the \$25,000 that initiated the charitable foundation known as the Ford Foundation in 1936. Unlike John D. Rockefeller, who was a copious note taker, who brought into his inner circle various advisors to help him think about his philanthropy, Henry Ford did no such thing. It was only as a result of Edsel Ford's premature death that the Ford Foundation as we know it today came into being. Henry Ford was known, unfortunately, in part as an anti-Semite, as a racist and this was known, because he published a news journal that was considered by many as a blatantly anti-Semitic publication. He later apologized for that and reconciled with who this day remains a part of the narrative about Henry Ford.

I am often asked about that history and people make references to it in contrasting the Ford Foundation today and the fact that at the helm of the Ford Foundation is a black, gay man. The irony of that given Henry Ford's own views about these matters, but he was a visionary in many ways and it's regrettable that his brilliance and his contributions to our society, to our economy have been marred by some of these extracurricular activities he was engaged in. Henry Ford was the first industrialist to recognize the consequences of inequality, he in articulating the simple idea that no worker should produce a product that he can't afford to buy, that was a very revolutionary idea. Ford's notion that there ought to be a car that his workers could, the average worker could buy was a radical idea and helped to usher in the middle class of the 20th century.

He was the first capitalist to recognize that workers had to have a wage that provided them with a basic standard of living. This in spite of the fact that Henry Ford was a very anti-union leader and he did all that he could, he took extraordinary, even illegal acts or I should say, unlawful in that the kinds of union busting and some of the criminal activity that was undertaken to keep unions from Ford has been well documented. He was a remarkable man. I'm actually more enamored of his son, Edsel, because it was Edsel's vision for the Ford Foundation and Edsel, like John D. Rockefeller, Jr., was a reluctant servant of his father's company. Edsel lasted after he was drafted into the company by his father. John D. Rockefeller, did not and John D. Rockefeller, Sr., recognized that it would be a mistake to keep Jr., at Standard Oil. Henry Ford would not accept the idea that Edsel would do anything but be at the Ford Motor Company and that caused serious problems between the two of them.

Edsel loved his father very very much, but it was a challenging relationship. Edsel was a remarkable man, he was erudite, worldly cosmopolitan and it was Edsel's idea to commission Diego Rivera to create those murals in the Detroit Institute of Arts. It was Edsel's own art collecting that serves as a foundation for some of the great works in the Detroit Institute of Arts. He was liberal in his thinking for the time. He was very expansive in his intellectual interest and he was interested in art and design and engineering and travel, things that his father simply was not. Henry Ford was not particularly interested in travel or curious in a sort of a cultural way about the world.

But, Edsel, sadly because of his early death at age 49 in 1943, his death presented the Ford family with a great dilemma, how to ensure that the Ford Motor Company, which was then held by the family privately could remain in their control given the very significant tax on Edsel's estate. It was the negotiation with the Internal Revenue Service that the Ford lawyers crafted a solution, which was to transfer a significant part of Edsel's privately held stock to the Ford Foundation. In doing so, because Henry Ford, II, Henry's grandson and Edsel's son would

become chairman of both entities, Ford Motor Company and Ford Foundation. In doing so, he and the family would exercise control over most of the stock of FMC. That of course, provided the wealth that ...[inaudible]

MONIZ: ... bring to looking up precedence in the Ford Foundation's work. So, when you talk about seeing Henry Ford as one of the most important figures of the 20th century and then having the Foundation having made the big grant to restore the home, I was curious about how you thought restoring Henry Ford's home and the story telling there fits into your belief about the importance of storytelling to disrupting inequality?

WALKER: I believe that narratives are the foundation of our understanding of who we are as a people. Narratives are told through physical space such as a home, a property, they're told through the visual, the way in which we represent ourselves. I believe that it is critically important for us to understand the personalities, the individuals, the complex lives of iconic people in our history and to contextualize their contributions and to help people understand how those contributions make possible today the progress that we seek in the world. Those contributions have made progress possible.

I am very proud of the grant making that the Ford Foundation has done with the proceeds of Henry Ford's genius in creating the Ford Motor Company. Of course, there is some irony in that the Ford Foundation was so critical to advancing women's rights when Henry Ford and his grandson, Henry Ford, II were very much against Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan and the creation of the Ms. Foundation and Ms. Magazine, women's studies and all of these areas that the Ford Foundation funded and in reality helped to create. These narratives should be ... Through these narratives we're able to understand the complexity and the contradictions that imbue our democracy our culture, who we are as a people and allow us to reflect honestly, genuinely rather than through some romanticized, sanitized version of a story about people that often is artificial.

For me, the narrative that is being created at Fair Lane, the Henry Ford Estate, recognizes that Henry Ford was an imperfect man, but more importantly it situates his contributions and the role of that estate and all of the laboratories that were on it and the activities that went on there, the scientific advances, etc. It allows us a window into the life of Henry and Clara Ford and their children and grandchildren, into their life of privilege, into the controversy, the advances that were made there. An understanding of context and in this town of Detroit who was coming and going and why they were there and really the critical role of Henry and Clara.

MONIZ: I know we only have a few more minutes, so let me ask you about your work rebuilding ties with Detroit and the Ford Family. Before you received the phone call that you mentioned when we spoke before from the judge in the Detroit bankruptcy case, had you been thinking about rebuilding ties with Detroit and the family?

WALKER: It troubled me, Amanda, that the Ford family did not hold us in high regard or know really the work of the foundation in recent years. I felt that was most unfortunate. I think I hadn't, when I became president, prioritized reconnecting with the Ford family, what spurred me on was an interview that William Clay Ford, Jr., Bill Ford gave on a local NPR station, I believe it was, where he during the bankruptcy after our gift was announced and the program moderator gave him credit and said, "Congratulations, I'm sure you and your family must be very proud of the Ford Foundation's gift and you, the Ford's are doing this," and he spoke of us all as a piece, the Ford family, the Ford Foundation, the Ford Motor Company. Bill interrupted him to say, "I'm sorry, I have to correct you, the Ford Foundation and my family have nothing to do with each other." He went on to say, "What happened with the Ford Foundation broke my family's heart," which was a really powerful thing to hear this very significant businessman and civic leader say such a thing that reflected the deep sense of grief in some ways that his family feels about the Ford Foundation.

When that was forwarded to me, someone sent me the link. I listened to it and I called a friend in Detroit, actually I called Steve Hamp, who is Bill Ford's brother-in-law, he is married to Sheila Ford-Hamp and Sheila and her brother, Bill Ford and Sheila's husband, Steve Hamp and I had lunch at the Detroit Athletic Club. Over lunch, they proceeded to tell me how dispiriting it has been for them to watch the Ford Foundation from the sidelines, to not be invited to the Ford building or be on the mailing list even.

Bill Ford recounted that he had called the Foundation and his call was never returned, according to Bill. This was very troubling to me. And I, during that time, because this was right in the middle of the bankruptcy and so for me I thought we have to repair the breach. It is in the Ford Foundation's interest to do this, it's not as if we're doing a favor to the Ford family, they helped to create and make it possible for the Ford Foundation to exist. Not only is it a matter of gratitude, it's a matter of decency in my view. Just seeing the earnestness and sincerity on their face and the completely, there was no sense of entitlement or anger or any such sentiment expressed. They were very grateful, as they said for the opportunity to talk to me. That for me was quite awkward, in some ways it was awkward to have members of the Ford family expressing their gratitude that I had acknowledged them.

MONIZ: What do you hope will come from this reconciliation?

WALKER: I think somethings have already come. The relationship with the Ford family, beginning with the matriarch, Martha Firestone Ford. Mrs. William Clay Ford's, Sr., who is one of the great ladies of this country has been among the most gratifying aspects of this reconciliation. Getting to know Martha Ford has just been a joy of a lifetime for me in regaining that connection to her and the family. Reputationally, this has so neared the Ford Foundation's benefit. This reconciliation has, I think improved our standing in the community, the Fords are held in very high regard in Detroit and beyond. The fact that we had not been as active in Detroit as we could have been in the view of some has really been not very present, this re-engagement has really both contributed to reinvigorating the city and it's been for Ford Foundation, I think reinvigorating to have people recognizing us for doing what we really should be doing, which is our engagement in Detroit.

MONIZ: Do you have time tell me how the... I wanted to ask you how the experience of helping to forge the Grand Bargain has shaped your work since? That happened very early in your tenure as president.

WALKER: That's a great question, because it absolutely has shaped my thinking. One, the Grand Bargain required that we jettison some our traditional practices of not working outside of our stated program areas. There is no program for helping bankrupt cities, there's not grant making strategy that covers that and yet this is what was called for. So, lesson one was be prepared when a special opportunity presents itself to abandon the kind of normative program box thinking that constrains our ability to be creative and to innovate.

Secondly, the role of government is critical in any of our work regardless of whether we work with government or not, governments, the apparatus of government is all around us. If it is not functioning, it is very hard for our work to be achieved. Really working, understanding how to effectively work with government. In the case of Detroit, we had to work with the state legislature, we had to work with the mayor, we had to work with a recalcitrant group of stakeholders who understandably were upset and feeling very vulnerable and angry.

Finally, I would say that we have to be nimble and agile and prepared and build that capacity within our foundations to respond with a sense of urgency, to respond to those opportunities that can't wait for a quarterly meeting or a meeting that may be two quarters away before we can put an item on the docket. We've got to figure out ways, mechanisms and practices that, if something urgent happens where an answer is needed that we have that capacity to answer, to provide a solution with a sense of urgency that is needed sometimes in crisis.

It has absolutely informed my thinking, the Detroit Grand Bargain, has absolutely informed my thinking. We need to be bolder, we need to lead with courage more than we do today. We need to be comfortable with controversy and with naysayers who think that we're doing the wrong thing, but the conviction of our beliefs are really important. Today more than ever. Think about August 2017, there's never been a time when philanthropy needs to lead with courage more than today.

MONIZ: Can you say a little bit more about that?

WALKER: What I mean by that is, we're in a time when we are seeing manifestations of things that I thought were deep, deeply hidden beneath the veneer of the American narrative and yet we are seeing hate normalized, we are seeing people marching without hoods, saying deeply anti-Semitic, racist, evil things without shame or stigma. Comfortable doing that and so the role for philanthropy during a time like this is to remind us of our common humanity and to support those efforts that bring out the best in us. That not divide us, but help us heal and help us be committed to a more just and fair and peaceful world.

MONIZ: We're just about out of time, we're even slightly over.

Last question. Is there an object that captures your philanthropic story?

WALKER: An object? Wow, that's a good question Amanda.

I think the object that I have on my desk is a beautiful turtle that I received from a visitor from Africa, that's a small carved turtle. It just reminds me of being in this work for the long haul. The way in which the turtle just continually plods along without much fanfare to get across the finish line and get the job done, that's what we gotta do and that's certainly what I gotta do here at Ford.

MONIZ: Thank you so much for taking this time to speak with me. I really appreciate it.

WALKER: It's my pleasure. Thanks for this invitation.