

## Donor Profile: The Melvin S. Cutler Charitable Foundation

Camaraderie and mutual respect emerge in a conversation with several trustees of the Melvin S. Cutler Charitable Foundation about their philanthropic activities. The Foundation is a product of the vision, funding, and expansive personality of its eponymous donor, but Mel is quick to share credit for the work and recognition with his fellow trustees. Six in all, they include Mel and his adult children, Liz, an artist; and Doug Cutler, President of Cutler Management; his granddaughter Kelly Cutler; long-time colleague Frederic Mulligan, Chair of Cutler Associates; and attorney and friend, Robert Adler. Mel, Fred, and Rob spoke about the Foundation as well as the organizations and people it supports. They clearly cherish the task of distributing funds and are animated by the altruistic principles Mel has instilled.

Established in 1980, the Foundation is governed by a mix of Jewish and humanitarian ideals that reflect Mel's experiences growing up in the Bronx during the war years. Mel recalled living with his single mother and grandparents who imparted the importance of being a good person. Despite their modest circumstances, the family regularly contributed to a pushke (a donation box kept in Jewish homes). Not observantly Jewish, their lives were nonetheless imbued with Jewish values and a concern for their co-religionists. Mel describes first-hand memories of the Holocaust that shaped his worldview and inspired his concern for human suffering. Seeing Nazi victims pictured in *Life* magazine, learning about the murder of innocent Jews, and meeting distant relatives with tattooed arms endure as vivid recollections.

The Cutler Foundation divides its giving between traditional Jewish causes and non-Jewish organizations located principally in Worcester. Yet, these seemingly separate interests also overlap in meaningful ways. The eight levels of charity described by the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides are essential to the Cutler philosophy. The highest level enables recipients to establish themselves financially so that they do not become dependent on others. Accordingly, the Cutler Foundation is committed to helping beneficiaries gain economic knowledge and independence. Programs at mental health organizations, drug rehab facilities, veterans' shelters, youth groups, and artist cooperatives combat poverty by allowing people to create financial opportunities for themselves.

In addition to investing in individuals, the Foundation aims to benefit Worcester by supporting community institutions like hospitals and universities. But they also fund less conspicuous initiatives that



Cutler trustees Frederic Mulligan, Kelly Cutler, Barbara Crosbie, Mel Cutler, Elizabeth Cutler, Douglas Cutler, Robert Adler

allow for lasting returns at home. A case in point is their support for the Holocaust curriculum *Echoes and Reflections*, a national program of the ADL (Anti-Defamation League) which they insist should deliver local benefits. The Strassler Center twice hosted an *Echoes and Reflections* teacher workshop which afforded Massachusetts educators their only opportunity to participate in trainings. Rob attended the opening of the fall 2014 workshop and was pleased to observe how engaged the participants were. The Cutler Foundation has generously supported educational initiatives at the Strassler Center by endowing a fund that will support continued engagement with these local educators.

Fred describes learning philanthropy from Mel at the start of their professional relationship. Back in 1972, before the newly formed company even turned a profit, Fred recalls "we couldn't afford pencils but Mel was already directing donations." He approached charity with a smile and without waiting to be asked, in keeping with Maimonides's teachings. Rob asked about his motivation for leaving an imprint on the community in which he has found great success. Mel described the Foundation's positive impact on the Worcester community, its needy population, and many institutions as a legacy for his children and grandchildren.

Modest and averse to ostentation, Mel summarizes his many contributions prosaically, insisting "it was just the way I was brought up!" Thanks to a generous endowment, the Strassler Center will help carry his legacy into the future. And teachers and students will be enriched by it.

Mary Jane Rein