

## Seattle - city of infectious generosity - by Chris Liddell

Seattle may seem like an unlikely stop on a tour of the most important philanthropic centers in the USA.

After all it is only the 20th largest city in the country and is in a state (Washington State) with 6.9million people – not significantly bigger than New Zealand. True it is the home of some great companies (Microsoft, Amazon, Starbucks, CostCo, Boeing) but that is not its importance. Rather it is a fascinating example of a vibrant ecosystem of philanthropy

The 800lb gorilla (or more accurately \$60b gorilla) is the Gates Foundation, the world's largest and possibly best known foundation. But the Gates Foundation is just the tip of a large iceberg of philanthropic entities.

Take for example the Raikes Foundation, which is roughly the same size as NEXT. It was established by Jeff and Trisha Raikes and focusses on education and youth homelessness. Jeff grew up in a small rural area of Nebraska, a farming state not unlike New Zealand in a lot of ways, and he and his wife have many of the values that we kiwis would relate to and respect. I had the privilege of working with him for 5 years when he ran a division of Microsoft (the one that produced, amongst other things, the Office Suite of products that most of us use on a daily basis) and also admire what he did afterwards, initially serving as CEO of the Gates Foundation, and then setting up his own foundation with his wife Trisha.

Jeff's story sounds fantastic, and it is, but interestingly in Seattle it isn't that unusual. That is because of the culture that Bill Gates permeated through all of Microsoft, and into the surrounding community. He was obviously a powerful role model, but also stressed through the company the importance of giving back. For example Microsoft each year has a "giving campaign" where every employee is encouraged to support a local charity, either with time and/or money. Employees are given time off to participate, and the company matches \$ for \$ contributions they make up to a generous ceiling (currently \$15,000 per employee. It also values their time, and matches that with \$'s. The giving campaign was well ahead of its time, starting in 1983, when 200 employees raised \$17,000. Now it raises over \$100m each year and has over 70% of its 100,000 person employee base participate. Separately It also has its own foundation (Microsoft Philanthropies), which is funded directly by the company and carries out great projects around the world

This culture is infectious. Microsoft has a number of wealthy alumni, and they have carried on the tradition of generosity and "giving back". But so have many other companies and individuals in the city, some independently, some encouraged by the overall spirit of generosity. And it hasn't just been large amounts. There have been innovations such as Social Venture Partners which creates networks of people to work on issues of their choice. Social Venture Partners was started in 1997 by Paul Brainerd and a group of Seattle business leaders, and now has 3500 members worldwide in 40 cities globally.

So what are the lessons for New Zealand? First, wealth creation can foster generosity, especially if it is generated by leaders who role model great behavior. Second, companies can have a role in promoting employee engagement in community activities. This is good for the company, good for the employees, and good for the community. Third, a virtuous cycle can be created by people being encouraged by, and in some cases copying, others who show the way. We need to continue to develop our culture of philanthropy in our own way, but there are some wonderful examples out there that we can learn from, especially in Seattle.

<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/>

<http://www.raikesfoundation.org/>

<https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/philanthropies/>

<http://www.socialventurepartners.org/>