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Cultural Conversation / With Rebecca W. Rimel

A Foundation Head Central To the Philadelphia Story

By JUDITH H. DOBRZYNSKI

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There's a word for people like Rebecca W. Rimel (especially when it's used, and pronounced, the way the French apply it to a certain kind of woman): formidable.



Martin Kozlowski

Ms. Rimel, 55, has led the Pew Charitable Trusts since 1994. With some \$5.2 billion in assets, the Pew, a legacy of the family that started Sun Oil, expects to disburse almost \$250 million this fiscal year. By any standard, it would be a heavyweight in the foundation world, except that the Pew is no longer a grant-giving foundation. In 2004, it transformed itself into a public charity, putting itself into the program business, enabling it to spend sizable sums on lobbying, and enhancing its power.


In recent months, Ms. Rimel (pronounced RHYME-el), has been at the center of two controversial cultural initiatives. With the Pew's \$20 million contribution to a \$150 million campaign, she led the way for the famed Barnes Foundation to move from the suburbs, where visitors have been limited, and restricted to three days a week, into a new gallery in central Philadelphia. More recently, with the Pew's \$3 million contribution, Ms. Rimel helped rescue Thomas Eakins's masterpiece, "The Gross Clinic," from the clutches of Alice Walton's Crystal Bridges Museum in Arkansas and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, which had agreed to purchase the painting from Thomas Jefferson University for \$68 million.

Some critics, including one who called the Barnes move a "takeover," see hypocrisy in the two ventures: While the Pew and its partners intervened to entrench one painting in the city, they deliberately snatched the Barnes collection from its idiosyncratic home in Merion, Pa., ignoring the intent of its founder, Dr. Albert C. Barnes.

As soon as I arrived in her modern 17th-floor aerie in Philadelphia, Ms. Rimel started in on what may be her favorite subject, her adopted city (she's from Charlottesville, Va., but has been with the Pew since 1983). The message she exudes -- contrary to those critics -- is "it's not about me; it's about Philadelphia."

Ms. Rimel sees culture as one way the City of Brotherly Love, which has slowly been rising from

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its beaten-down past, will thrive again. "Philadelphia will keep its nose up if it has more product to offer," she says.

She envisions a day when art-lovers will plan visits to Philadelphia and make side trips to New York, instead of vice versa. The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art are rich, she concedes, "but there is no collection like the Barnes Collection," which can boast of one of the largest collections of Impressionist, post-Impressionist and Modern paintings in the world. Among its treasures are 69 Cezannes, 46 Picassos, and 59 Matisses, including his 1906 masterpiece, "Bonheur de Vivre."

It's that kind of thinking that led the Pew, under Ms. Rimel, to intercede with the Barnes and the Eakins. "Both will be accessible to more people," she explained. "Ultimately, my board and I believe that art in the public domain ought to be accessible to all who want to see it." So relocating the Barnes, which was broke, is a source of pride -- with no reservations. Dr. Barnes, Ms. Rimel said, wanted the collection to be accessible to "plain folk." And, she added, he wrote an "if all else fails" clause, which suggested that if ever his restrictions made life for the Barnes impossible, the collection could be moved to Philadelphia.

Ms. Rimel called the idea of a Pew takeover "nonsense." Rather than control the Barnes, "we are passing the baton to the Barnes, which is building a national board," she said.

The Barnes initiative also laid the foundations for "The Gross Clinic" maneuver, as had a previous rescue. A few years ago, the Pew had stopped the departure of "Dream Garden," a mosaic created by Maxfield Parrish and Louis Comfort Tiffany, to Las Vegas (helping the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts buy it). When the sale of "The Gross Clinic" was announced, Ms. Rimel got on the phone and "called my partners" from the Barnes bailout -- chiefly the Annenberg Foundation, the Lenfest Foundation, and the Neubauer Family Foundation. "It was all-hands-on-deck," she said. Within weeks, they raised about half the \$68 million and arranged a bridge loan for the rest.

Ms. Rimel agreed that other communities may well have to grapple with the same issue. "We have to help people realize that the benefit-to-risk ratio of having these riches and marketing them, instead of monetizing them, is higher," she said.

The Pew is no stranger to cultural ambitions. As recently as 1999, it announced an unprecedented plan to invest \$50 million to develop a national cultural policy on issues like arts financing, arts education, intellectual property rights and zoning in historical areas. When the stock market went to pieces, however, the Pew retreated, deploying its reduced cultural spending almost exclusively in Philadelphia. It has remained near 9% of the Pew's own spending, down from double-digits, but less than that if donor-committed funds are considered. (Money pledged for the Barnes and the Eakins is part of "special projects," not core culture.)

"Now we are coming back out the other end," Ms. Rimel said. But the Pew is not returning to a cultural policy initiative. Instead, for example, "we're taking national the Pennsylvania Cultural Data Project." That initiative, which streamlined the grant-making process of many funders statewide with common application forms, also produces standardized operating data from cultural institutions that help guide programming and policy-making.

"We are in discussions with four other states," Ms. Rimel said, including California. "We'll run it, but they pay the costs. This is our first foray back into the cultural policy arena."

The Pew was instrumental in the development of PhillyFunGuide.com, which centralizes information about arts and humanities programs and provides access to discounted tickets. Noting the proliferation of performing-arts groups, Ms. Rimel said she may attempt to encourage stretched groups to share services.

Ms. Rimel's eyes light up when she mentions another initiative under study -- a subsidized "Arts Train" that would offer visitors to Philadelphia amenities like hors d'oeuvres while they traveled to a package of cultural activities for, say, \$100. The Pew's new status as a public charity may help here, because the Pew is seeking corporate partners for the Arts Train. In fact, while critics of the change focused on the Pew's new lobbying capacity, the more potent weapon may be its new fund-raising ability. In the past three years, a diverse group of about 90 corporations, foundations and individuals have given the Pew about \$110 million for programs. Ms. Rimel thinks this "smart outsourcing" is one way philanthropy will evolve; it saves on the creation of infrastructure and minimizes the learning curve inherent in giving away money fruitfully.

And by the way, she notes, the Pew did this, after a few years of study and petitions to the IRS, in 2004 -- long before Warren Buffett decided to give his fortune to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for efficiency reasons.

"We didn't know if anyone would knock on the door or if everyone would," Ms. Rimel said. "We are wowed by the size of it." This year, the Pew plans to undertake a review to "determine if this should grow. We've had no marketing; it's all word-of-mouth."

Ms. Rimel is not interested in just growth, though. The Pew has turned down gifts that could not be put to good use. In one case, for example, the cause was noble, but "the issue was not winnable," she said, even after the would-be donor offered to up the ante. She does not want to get "off-mission," to go where the money is. For her, it's all about victory.

Ms. Dobrzynski is a writer in New York.

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