

What Jessie Ball duPont Teaches Us About Giving



By SHERRY MAGILL

When I am asked to comment on charitable giving, I often think about Mrs. duPont's personal giving and what I have learned leading the private foundation that carries her name. Forty-six years after her death she still has much to teach us.

Jessie Dew Ball was born in 1884 in Virginia's rural and poor Northern Neck. While the Balls were descendants of Virginia's First Families, Jessie's family was not wealthy. After graduating from college and teaching public school, she married the wealthy Alfred I. duPont in 1921. She outlived him by 35 years, and her personal philanthropy during those decades proves she was a woman of keen intelligence, exceptional generosity and wisdom.

Upon her death in 1970, Mrs. duPont bequeathed her estate to create the Jessie Ball duPont Religious, Charitable and Educational Fund to continue giving in perpetuity.

Jessie Ball duPont understood deeply the human obligation to share one's good fortune with those less fortunate, to give generously, to open one's heart to his or her fellows. "I believe that funds should be spent for the benefit of society," she famously wrote. "I have always believed it. Don't call it charity... I think it is an obligation."

Her giving was rooted in community, reflected in major local institutions — the church, the school, the local nonprofit — and in local stories, history and culture. In other words, she gave to organizations rooted in the American democratic narrative that binds local folks together with a sense of purpose and meaning; that balances individual rights with one's obligation to nurture communities and serve a larger public purpose. She was not attempting to change the world. But she was compassionate and generous and she understood far better than many do today the extraordinary importance and power of people in com-

munity. She wanted to use her giving to help someone else live a better life.

While the world in which Mrs. duPont practiced her philanthropy was filled with its own complexity, it was in many ways a far simpler world, one much easier to understand and "do good works in" than the world in which we currently live. It was not a perfect world, but people understood the central importance of community and one's individual responsibilities to something larger than self. Government was seen as an expression

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of the collective will; there was confidence that citizens could solve problems and, for the most part, people thought they were "in this together." Nonprofit organizations were understood in their community context, and seen as essential to the work of helping less fortunate people do better.

I tell you about Mrs. duPont's giving because in so many ways it is different, simpler and, I might argue, more centered than much of what we read about giving today

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school. She continued this practice throughout her life, helping scores of individuals attend college.

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Mrs. duPont made gifts to organizations all over the country. Why, you may ask, did she support the Episcopal Diocese of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, for example, or the Nordica Memorial Association in Farmington, Maine? Because someone asked her.

We often give because we are asked. That invitation opens the possibility of a new relationship between the donor and the organization – a relationship that can have lasting impact and

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enhance both the organization and the life of the donor. Mrs. duPont's legacy is testimony to the potential of such relationships.

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In places such as Port St. Joe, the Northern Neck of Virginia, Wilmington, Delaware, and Jacksonville, Florida, Mrs. duPont gave generously and broadly. She did not give to one church, she gave to dozens of churches in the same community. She gave to multiple cultural organizations, multiple educational institutions, multiple child-serving organizations. She knew it took a network of entities to make a community strong and she cared about strong communities.

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While giving is ultimately about helping people, Mrs. duPont recognized the crucial role played by the nonprofit organization. We most often see that organization as a service provider. But Mrs. duPont also recognized the value of organizations that serve as advocates or intermediaries. She supported entities such as the National Council on Crime and Delinquency and the National Association of Juvenile Court Judges because she valued the unique roles that they play.

She also knew that nonprofits of all types must have the resources to do the work they are called to do. So she helped build organizations, develop their expertise and establish the "infrastructure" they need to operate at an optimum level.

Finally, Mrs. duPont understood that *giving* — not the size of the gift — mattered most.

Many of Mrs. duPont's gifts were small: \$100 to St. Anthony's Hospital, \$369 to Theatre Jacksonville, \$175 to Bluefield College, \$500 to the Northumberland County Rescue Squad, \$100 to Woodlawn Plantation, \$50 to White Stone United Methodist Church, \$300 to Transylvania University, \$150 to Washington College, \$275 to St. Michael's School and Nursery, \$50 to the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. The list could go on.

Yes, she made many large gifts. But when Mrs. duPont planned the perpetual fund that would bear her name, she did not weigh those who would be eligible by the size of her gifts. Organizations to whom she had contributed \$50 were given the same stature as those to whom she had contributed more than \$1 million.

Mrs. duPont demonstrated the enduring values that should guide our giving. It is not about how much we give. It is about the act of giving — of helping others, building relationships, fostering a sense of community and supporting organizations that make life better for someone else.

It is in these acts of investing in something other than ourselves that we show the best of who we are.

Sherry Magill is president of the Jessie Ball duPont Fund.