A belief in impact

Tad Taube:
“It is the wave of the future: having funders come together and pool their dollars.”

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Philanthropist embraces collaborative giving

BY SARAH DUXBURY
San Francisco Chronicle Times

Tad Taube takes philanthropy personally. The Woodside resident has helped give away hundreds of millions of dollars over the past 30 years to institutions in which he has deep personal connection, both in his own name and as president of the board at the Koret Foundation.

In many respects, Taube’s traditional local philanthropy writ large: He gives to San Francisco’s civic giants like the opera, ballet and symphony, to the United Way and to the Jewish Community Center, and he gives big to his alma mater, Stanford University.

But he also devotes a significant amount of time and money to Jewish causes in Poland, where he was born and from which he fled at age seven in advance of the Nazis.

But look into these gifts, ask Taube about the ones that matter most to him and how he structures them, and it is clear that he is no rote writer of checks, but a man intent on impact — both on and by the organization.

The businessman — he currently is chairman and founder of Woodmont companies, a real estate investing and management group in Reno, and prior to that he ran Koracorp Industries until Levi Strauss bought it in 1979 — seeks to make game-changing grants, providing funds necessary to take a bold new direction, albeit a direction that captures Taube’s fancy.

Idea generator

At the opera, Taube and his wife, Diane, underwrite many of the Puccini operas staged. That’s a conventional (if deep-pocketed) way to support an arts group, and Diane Taube sits on the opera board.

But the Taubes aren’t merely conventional patrons. When David Gockley took over as general director of the San Francisco Opera in 2006, the Koret Foundation asked Gockley for his top ideas for the opera.

Koret and Taube chose jointly to provide over $2 million in digital media suite that is central to Gockley’s quest to democratize opera, streaming performances in the parks and ballparks of San Francisco, and in high-definition movie theaters around the country.

None of these initiatives would have been possible without that media suite, Gockley said.

“It changed the course of the role that San Francisco Opera plays vis-à-vis the broader community and the world,” Gockley said. “It means we can be accessible to a much broader public outside the opera house, and we have just begun to really exploit all the possibilities.”

Such game-changing grant-making is also apparent at the Taube Koret Campus for Jewish Life in Palo Alto, where the two foundations, again in concert, provided the lead grant to build a multi-generational Jewish campus on an 8.5-acre parcel of land. Each gave $10 million to the project, the largest grant either foundation had ever made.

It’s even true at the United Way, one of the few human services agencies that the Taube Philanthropies support. CEO Anne Wilson said that Taube’s dollars (since the early 1990s he has been a member of the ‘million dollar roundtable,’ a group of fewer than 20 individuals who have given over $1 million to United Way of the Bay Area) and his personal support were critical to implementing TRAK, a cutting-edge technology in the early 1990s that helped caseworkers in different social service areas communicate to reduce abductions.

“He finds interesting projects and brings other people to them,” Wilson said. “He’s willing to use his personal wisdom and influence to make things happen, and he’s done big things outside the United Way — stuff in Poland, and with Stanford that are really big ideas that he launches.”

Maximizing dollars

Sometimes it’s hard to tell quite where Taube’s philanthropy ends and Koret’s begins. In some ways, that is by design.

Taube is keenly aware that his own dollars can go only so far. Though Taube Philanthropies had close to $130 million in its two foundations at the end of 2007, according to their IRS filings, Taube knows each of those dollars can do more in partnership with other dollars. Koret’s also aware, since the foundations share similar values and missions, and every joint grant helps maximize the impact of what each foundation hopes to accomplish. The Koret Foundation has assets close to $414 million at the end of 2007, according to filings.

“One of the things we’ve learned about impact is collaborative funding, the old saying that 2+2 = 5,” Taube said. “That’s why we tend often to pool our money. Getting a great amount of money focused, particularly on large projects, to gain maximum impact is where philanthropy is going.”

But Taube’s a practical man, broad-minded in his ability to partner.

He and Koret have given $3 million to support John and Cynthia West’s $12.5 million donation for a new home for the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIERP), which will be complete in February 2010.

Taube’s also worked with John Sobrato, a mentor, to establish the National Hispanic University in Santa Clara. One upcoming collaboration is the Koret Taube Education Center at the California Academy of Sciences, to which the two foundations have contributed $4 million.

“The reason for collaborative projects versus my focus on my own Taube Philanthropies is that I think it’s the wave of the future, having funders come together and pool their dollars,” Taube said.

But Taube is not afraid to go his own way, especially in his giving to Stanford University, where there is the Taube Center for Jewish Studies; the Taube Hillen House; the Taube Family Tennis Stadium; the Tad and Diane Taube directorship of the Hoover Institution and other support of Hoover and SIEPR, on whose boards Taube serves.

Focus on leadership, results

Leadership is a factor in most of his gifts.

“He says we need good leaders for these organizations, and to attract good takers, they need resources to take the initiatives they want to take,” said John Shoven, executive director of SIEPR, explaining why Taube has established a no-strings-attached director’s discretionary fund at both the Hoover Institute and at SIEPR.

Indeed, leadership is often the deciding factor in what Taube will and will not fund. So is impact. Taube
is suspicious of many traditional charities, unconvinced that they have the impact that he believes they should. An exception is the United Way.

Because of those suspicions about the efficiency of some well-meaning institutions, Taube is careful that the money he gives funds discrete, measurable causes — as shown in the number of buildings, rooms, endowed professorships and other facilities that bear his name, or that of Koret.

"Making the money is often far easier than giving it away intelligently," Taube said.

One difficulty is measuring results on what often is a social return. That’s another reason Taube supports leaders in whom he believes, and he also likes to take a leadership role himself. For example, he’s been on the board of SIEPR for over 25 years, Shoven said, and he has pushed the institute to communicate directly with the outside world.

"The view is that you have got to communicate with policy makers and for that matter with the American public. You can’t just do research in an ivory tower," Shoven said.

Taube therefore funded SIEPR’s monthly publication, SIEPR Policy Briefs. Taube and Koret have both also supported conferences hosted by SIEPR and help sponsor its annual economic summit.

Focus on ‘Jewish Peoplehood’

While the Bay Area is a major focus of Taube’s philanthropy, so is Poland. It is there, in Warsaw, that Taube is building a museum on the history of Polish Jews. Most of his giving to Poland is through the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture, the larger of the two foundations in the Taube Philanthropies.

A major new local effort for Taube is what he calls his initiative on Jewish Peoplehood, which began as a program at the San Francisco Jewish Community Center, and similar programs are being developed at the Peninsula JCC and the Ohelmann JCC at the Taube Koret Campus in Palo Alto. The initiative sponsors lectures, exhibitions, concerts and other special events oriented around Jewish culture.

Of course, the recession will likely slow down Taube’s philanthropy. He declined to share specifics, but said his personal foundations are down in the neighborhood of 25 percent — in line with the losses at many endowments. Nevertheless, a tally of the causes he supports puts his personal philanthropic commitments at over $100 million over the past decade. Taube did say that he will continue to support the organizations he sees as delivering the most impact at the same levels as in past years.

One area where Taube expects to commit more time and resources in the future is public education. Hibbert, most of his involvement with K-12 education has been through the Koret Foundation, but that will change. "I don’t feel at this point that I have done enough, and I plan to devote more energy and significantly more resources to that area," Taube said.

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