

In Honor Of the Fund That Loves New York

By PAUL GOLDBERGER

Ford, Carnegie, Mellon and Rockefeller are respectable enough names in the realm of foundations, but in the minds of most people concerned with historic preservation, city planning and the quality of life in New York City, they don't hold a candle to Kaplan. The J. M. Kaplan Fund, with assets of roughly \$120 million — an amount that the Ford Foundation would consider a rounding error — has for years been the first stop for those seeking grants to save buildings, support cultural institutions, restore landmarks and finding innovative ways of creating housing in New York.

The foundation put up the money to save Carnegie Hall in the 1960's when no one else would bother; it created Westbeth, the artists' housing in lower Manhattan that turned out to be a model for the rehabilitation of industrial buildings everywhere; it provided the first financial support for the New York City Greenmarkets, the South Street Seaport Museum and the Urban Center Bookstore at the Municipal Art Society. It started the Gracie Mansion Conservancy, enabled the Natural Resources Defense Council to set up its Urban Law Center and the New School to start its Center for New York City Affairs, and led the campaign for public toilets in New York.

The fund, established by Jacob M. Kaplan, the former owner of the Welch Grape Juice Company, began giving away money in 1947. Tomorrow evening it will mark 50 years of its grant-making with a celebration at the Rainbow Room that will also honor the 70th birthday of Joan Kaplan Davidson, one of Kaplan's four children, a passionate preservationist and cultural activist who ran the foundation from 1977 through 1993 and set it firmly in its present direction.

Tomorrow's event also symbolizes the transfer of authority to the next generation. Ms. Davidson's four children and three of

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Alan E. Solomon for The New York Times

Joan Kaplan Davidson

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their cousins have been taking over gradually since Ms. Davidson stepped down as president to become New York State Parks Commissioner in 1993, and now the foundation is at least as much theirs as their mother's. Their interests are not quite the same as those of Ms. Davidson or her two sisters and brother, and hovering over tomorrow's celebration is the question of whether the fund, which has been virtually synonymous with a certain kind of philanthropy in New York since the saving of Carnegie Hall, will continue to do the same thing.

Like many family foundations, the Kaplan Fund has an informal mandate. It was created to support worthy causes, and for the first 30 years, worthy causes were whatever J. M. Kaplan thought they were. Kaplan, an iconoclastic businessman who helped create a grape growers' cooperative and eventually sold his company to it, cared about union democracy, the New School for Social Research and, after Isaac Stern came to see him one night at his town house on East 80th Street, Carnegie Hall.

He had no interest in building a philanthropic bureaucracy. "If you had something to discuss, you would see the old man himself," said Kent Barwick, head of the New York State Historical Society. "Most foundations wanted you to do a study of a study and a four-year review before they would talk to you, and then they'd say your idea fell outside of their guidelines. But the Kaplan Fund was always open to new ideas. Jack Kaplan would lecture you, he would growl a little, and then he would come up with a check. It was the place you would go to get anything started."

One of the efforts that excited Kaplan most after he provided the emergency grant to save Carnegie Hall was the creation of housing for artists in Manhattan. In 1967 the Kaplan Fund joined with the Nation-

al Endowment for the Arts to start Westbeth, set within the old Bell Labs at the corner of West and Bethune Streets. The project made both sociological and architectural history: it was among the earliest conversions of an old industrial building to housing in the country, it was one of the first projects intended specifically to house artists, and it started the career of the architect Richard Meier.

Kaplan asked his daughter Joan, who had recently resettled in New York with her four children, to manage the creation of Westbeth. That, in turn, set her on a career of involvement in the physical form of New York. When Kaplan retired in 1977 — he died at 95 in 1987 — he turned the management of the foundation over to her.

Joan Davidson, a tall woman with crisp features and silvery hair who was more comfortable picketing to save an endangered landmark than sitting behind a desk, maintained the informality of the foundation: no long studies, no committees, the boss makes the decisions. She focused the fund even more firmly in the direction of issues related to New York City's architecture, design and quality of life. She established additional programs to support the arts, human rights, natural resources and rural preservation in upstate New York, and set up a separate program, called Furthermore, that supports catalogues and books in the fund's areas of interest.

"I always thought we were different because we did not just write checks, we stepped in and got involved," she said last week. "We didn't give huge amounts of money. To us the point was to use money strategically, to get causes off the ground."

The fund's grants have tended to be in the tens of thousands of dollars, not the hundreds of thousands, and some are as small as \$1,000. Many are responses to pleas from outsiders: the Kaplan Fund gave Peter Neill the money to leave his job in advertising and start what became

the South Street Seaport Museum, for example. But sometimes it has come up with projects on its own. Urban Center Books, the bookstore at the Municipal Art Society's headquarters on Madison Avenue, came into being simply because Ms. Davidson thought New York needed a good architectural bookstore, and decided that the fund would have to start one.

"We just did what we felt was needed," she said. By the late 1970's, the fund's reputation was such that even a small Kaplan grant was enough to give a new cause legitimacy. And the absence of Kaplan support could raise questions whether a preservation or city planning cause was good enough to pass muster.

Only one of the next generation of Kaplans — who are actually Davidsons or Fonsecas, children of Joan or her sister, Elizabeth Fonseca — lives in New York City. And while they understand that the foundation's roots are in the city, their interests have begun to move farther afield.

Bradford Davidson, one of Joan Davidson's sons, lives in Annapolis, Md., and he has encouraged his siblings and cousins to support a series of grants to civic organizations there. Peter Davidson, another son, lives in New York, but he has promoted a whole new area of giving in archeology, deep-sea exploration and technology. The fund has made large grants to help establish the Institute for Exploration at Mystic, Conn.

"It's a very interesting time, since we are all trying to decide what we want the foundation to be," Peter Davidson said last week. "We are all very happy with what it's been: my mother made the foundation central in the life of New York. But how do we go forward from here? Figuring it out has become kind of like family therapy. But we know we want to take more advantage of the interests of a new generation of trustees."

Betsy Davidson, who is now the fund's co-chairwoman, said: "We all grew up here, and our hearts are here. But we are edging out, and a foundation like this can't be a personal thing, the way it was with my grandfather."

In this sense the evolution of the Kaplan Fund mirrors the shift in many family foundations as they move to a younger generation, with multiple siblings and cousins sitting around a table that was once commanded by a single patriarch. And

while the younger generation may be as committed to philanthropy as their parents or grandparents, they often do not have the same intensity of feeling about particular causes.

But if the Kaplan Fund does edge even slightly away from New York City in its grant making, it will leave a huge void, especially since both the Vincent Astor Foundation and the Aaron Diamond Foundation, two of the most prominent and powerful foundations that have focused their philanthropy on New York City, are phasing themselves out of existence.

Paradoxically, while New York City is a national center of philanthropy, its largest foundations pay little attention to the city. The Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, the Mellon Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation are all based here, but they focus most of their grant-making elsewhere.

"The Kaplan Fund is the one of the only foundations that is genuinely committed to New York," said Mitchell Moss, director of New York University's Urban Research Center. "In most cities, foundations based there feel a moral responsibility to maintain the social and economic fabric of their community, like the MacArthur Foundation in Chicago and the Pew in Philadelphia. But in New York, all the bigger foundations in this city seem only to want to operate in a larger sphere, and become intergalactic in their concerns."

As Joan Davidson put it, "The great foundations have the whole world. We have always just wanted to strike a blow for small, decisive things in a world of mega."