

## Catalyst Movement Builders

An Interview with Jean Case,  
Chief Executive Officer, Case Foundation and Chairman, National Geographic Society Board of Trustees

**EDITORS' NOTE** Jean Case is an actively engaged philanthropist, investor, and a pioneer in the world of interactive technologies. Her career in the private sector spanned nearly two decades before she and her husband, Steve, created the Case Foundation in 1997. Prior to this, as a senior executive at America Online, Inc. (AOL), she directed the marketing and branding effort that launched the AOL service, directed the communications strategy for taking the company



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public, and helped establish AOL as a household utility. Before joining AOL, she held strategic marketing positions at GE's Information Services Division and at The Source. Case was also an advisor to the U.S. National Advisory Board to the Social Impact Investing Task Force established by the G8 and served in two appointed roles leading strategic public-private efforts, including the President's Council on Service and Civic Participation, to which she was appointed as Chair by President George W. Bush, and as Co-chair of the U.S.-Palestinian Partnership. Case is chairman of the National Geographic Society Board of Trustees and is a member of the advisory boards of the Harvard Business School Social Enterprise Initiative, the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, and Georgetown University's Beek Center for Social Impact & Innovation.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** Created in 1997 by Steve and Jean Case, the Case Foundation ([casefoundation.org](http://casefoundation.org)) is focused on creating programs and investing in people and organizations that can change the world by harnessing the best impulses of entrepreneurship, innovation, technology, and collaboration to address urgent social challenges. The majority of the foundation's efforts are currently deployed to catalyze two major movements – impact investing and inclusive entrepreneurship – built on the support of three key pillars: revolutionizing philanthropy, unleashing entrepreneurship, and igniting civic engagement.

For a sense of some of the work the foundation is presently leading, see the TED Talk that Jean recently gave that highlights the importance innovators have played in the history of the United States and examines the state of entrepreneurship today (<http://bit.ly/2jxbtrt>). Case argues there is a tremendous opportunity to seize by expanding access to capital by investing in

women and entrepreneurs of color and sets forward a clarion call for all to join in on building an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem that would give everyone an equal chance at unlocking the American Dream.

**Will you talk about the vision for the Case Foundation early on and, 20 years later, has it remained consistent?**

When we started the foundation, we didn't know what we didn't know.

But we brought with us a very healthy respect for the entrepreneurial spirit. We had seen firsthand the power of the entrepreneurial spirit as we built AOL, and in the companies that were growing and innovating around us.

We committed to invest in people and ideas that could change the world. I would venture that it took between three and five years before I felt like I had my sea legs and could fully understand what our opportunities were and where we could effectively leverage our transformative power to make a difference in the lives of others.

Looking back on the first 20 years of our work, we have been very consistent in our desire to bring the entrepreneurial spirit to everything we do and everything we fund. Based on our tech backgrounds, we have always sought to level the playing field and bring the power of democratization to as many of our efforts as possible. We believe that these elements are central to our ability to build initiatives that make a real impact and play to our strengths.

**Do you look to support a few flagship programs or do you address a broad range of needs?**

We are catalyst investors and catalyst movement builders for the most part. We typically go in early, try to get the flywheel effect going, and then work with others who take it beyond its start-up phase.

As result, we've had a number of different campaigns through the years, usually focused on one or two big areas for anywhere from three to five years.

**Will you discuss how you've revolutionized philanthropy through programs like the Be Fearless campaign, for instance?**

We feel terrific about the impact of the Be Fearless campaign. We commissioned the original work to take a look at transformative

change and the lessons that could be shared with others. Out of that was born the Be Fearless principles. The firms we hired to do the research told us that where there was transformative change, these principles were present. I truly believe that the five principles capture much of the essence of the entrepreneurial spirit that we think is so important. The five principles are: Make Big Bets and Make History; Experiment Early and Often; Make Failure Matter; Reach Beyond Your Bubble; and Let Urgency Conquer Fear.

Wherever possible, we try to apply the Be Fearless principles to all the work we do at the Case Foundation. In the philanthropy and entrepreneurial space, there is a clear need for leaders to make big bets on big social change and reach beyond their bubble and find new streams of talent. They need to experiment, seeking out ideas and attracting people who bring different perspectives and backgrounds that can better inform their work and their mission. With this urgency and experimentation, failure is an option. Our Be Fearless work has taught us that, just like the private sector, the social sector needs to learn from those failures and overcome fears to succeed. We've done this for the past 20 years at the Case Foundation and we've found that innovation happens at these intersections, but it requires people to try new things and be fearless.

**How do you unleash entrepreneurship, and can you put in metrics to show impact in those areas?**

One movement we champion is called "inclusive entrepreneurship." As we started out with our exploration of this movement, we recognized that today venture capital is the "jet fuel" behind high growth entrepreneurs and their companies. Yet access to this "jet fuel" is not equal for all. Venture capital, which in addition to its financial power brings with it all-important mentoring and networking opportunities, has long favored a small group of society – mostly male, mostly white. In recent years only 10 percent of venture capital has gone to companies with a female founder, and only one percent has gone to companies with an African American founder.

At the Case Foundation, we believe that this data, while arresting, also represents a powerful economic opportunity to seize, simply by taking steps to be intentional in reaching out to find and fund new, high growth and innovative startups from broader segments of society.

By building on ramps to funding, networking, and mentoring for all sectors of society, we can expand economic opportunities more broadly, tap markets that have been underserved, and tell anyone from anywhere that they can have access to the American Dream.

### **Will you discuss your efforts around civic engagement?**

Civic engagement has been a significant pillar of ours for a long time. In 2007, we crafted a paper called Citizens at the Center. When I talk about this, people sometimes laugh because it should be so terribly obvious – Citizens at the Center means that those we are trying to serve should be part of building the solution. In the private sector, we would never launch a product or service without talking to the consumers that we were trying to build the product or service for. But in the social sector, we had seen too many cases where governments, nonprofits, or philanthropies had skipped this important step – they dreamed up ideas of how to serve people under florescent lights in a boardroom, completely detached from those they were trying to serve.

Therefore, we doubled down and have always committed ourselves and our partners to the concept that anything we do must always include the voice of those we're trying to serve.

As I mentioned before, 2017 marks the 20th Anniversary of the Case Foundation. As we look back, it's hard not to see that the common key to all of our efforts has been pushing ourselves and others to challenge assumptions and take risks. We believe this is also a central element of citizens in a democracy and, with this in mind, Steve and I wrote a blog to kickoff the year that challenged ourselves and others to get off the sidelines and "get into the arena" to address our most pressing challenges.

This is not a new idea of course, but it resonates more in the context of today's world than perhaps ever before. Citizen engagement has been a hallmark of successful democracies for centuries and is core to our mission. In 1910, Teddy Roosevelt gave a speech known as "The Man In The Arena" that captures this fundamental belief in citizen engagement and is where the term Get In The Arena came into the vernacular. So whether it is Citizens at the Center or our Get In The Arena campaign, we believe citizen engagement is an area where we all need to make an impact.

### **Is change stimulated by philanthropy most effective when it includes public/private partnership?**

Part of the reason we're so focused on entrepreneurship is that economic power comes from economic activity, so we think that is a must-have for philanthropy to be impactful.

As we have done work around the globe, the first question we ask is, "What is the opportunity for jobs in a community?" No amount of philanthropy and no amount of government

aid can make up for jobs that are missing. It involves human dignity issues as well.

Economic activity more broadly is something we always look at as part of the net. We are strong champions of public/private partnerships, and much of our global work has been just that. I do believe we need every sector at the table bringing to bear what they can.

### **There seems to be a heavy focus on corporate leaders aligning their philanthropic efforts with business. Have you seen that shift over the years?**

I work closely with Fortune 500 companies and CEOs, and they're quite aware the world is changing. To attract the best and brightest talents, these companies and leaders understand they are going to have to do more than just provide shareholders returns.

To stay competitive with this generation, leading companies are going to have to articulate the broad role they have in society. I'm very excited about the impact this could have across the corporate sector.

### **At senior levels, it seems there is a long way to go for women. Is the right dialogue happening to make that change?**

I see dramatic change, particularly among women, particularly in the entrepreneurship field. The fastest growing segment of entrepreneurs are women. In fact, women-owned firms are growing at a rate 1.5 times faster than the national average.

What female entrepreneurs lack are equal opportunities. They still face hurdles when it comes to building networks, finding mentors, and accessing capital. As a result, many of them are starting companies without access to the same things that can make other companies with male counterparts really sing and soar. There is a powerful economic opportunity for the nation if more sectors look to take advantage of the role female entrepreneurs play in driving job growth and our economy.

We talk about women and people of color, but there is a geographic split as well. Last year, 78 percent of venture capital went to just three places – New York, Massachusetts, and California, and yet roughly 78 percent of our Fortune 500 companies were started outside of those three states. There is a proven track record of success across the country, but we're putting all of our eggs into these three baskets, and that just isn't strategically smart for our nation or for the future of business.

### **Do you feel you can teach entrepreneurship or is it something innate?**

One can learn to become an entrepreneur. I do believe there are those born with it, almost independent of what their journey is; it's burning inside of them to become entrepreneurs. But for those who were never given the opportunity to think about entrepreneurship before, coaching, training, and access to opportunities can change the playing field.

At the Case Foundation, we are spending our resources supporting incubators and accelerators that are trying to serve women and

founders of color, two groups that have historically been overlooked as supportive of entrepreneurship. To learn more, go to [facesoffounders.org](http://facesoffounders.org) to see the stories and profiles of some of the young entrepreneurs we are highlighting. We find that founders come from all across our country and from many diverse backgrounds.

My husband has travelled all over the United States on his "Rise of the Rest" bus tours to shine a light on communities that investors have overlooked, to show that there is a lot of innovation and talent worthy of investment and resources all across the country.

### **What is the added value that The Giving Pledge has provided?**

Joining The Giving Pledge offered us truly unique opportunities to join with others to direct our philanthropy and social good work in even more effective ways. We were already giving the majority of our wealth away and were pretty far down that road before we signed the Pledge.

What really got us over any initial concerns we had when approached about joining The Giving Pledge was the opportunity to learn together with truly remarkable people who were committed to systematic, not just incremental change. We already knew there wasn't enough sharing of lessons learned amongst those trying to make an impact through philanthropy.

At day's end, we felt that joining The Giving Pledge was too good an opportunity to pass on, and we have been very fortunate to help in a leadership role around what we call the "Learning Series" in The Giving Pledge. This education work ensures we learn more about areas that we care about, what others have done, how we can improve what we do, and how we can share our lessons of failures and successes with each other.

### **Will you also touch on your National Geographic involvement?**

I have been affiliated with the organization for a decade and I'm now the Chairman of the Board. It is something I am very passionate about. National Geographic is a 129 years old "startup," and it was built on the belief in the power of science, exploration, and storytelling in education to change the world. This is in line with most of the other work that we have discussed today, whether speaking about the Case Foundation or our time at AOL.

The work being led by the National Geographic Society centers on engaging citizens across the world in all kinds of new ways, be it in the oceans, in archaeology, or other areas. This is leading to a very exciting new chapter in the story of science and exploration – today, people across the globe can leverage new tools and new technologies to champion or even become a part of new discovery and exploration, more so than ever before. That excites me as National Geographic can help lead democratization efforts that will engage more people and will likely bring new innovations to the world. ●