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## Kresge Foundation steps up gifts to Detroit causes

**Michael H. Hodges / Detroit News Arts Writer**

Call it an artist's jackpot, or a clever gambit to help Michigan hold on to some of its best creative talent.

Today, 18 Detroit-area artists officially will win \$25,000 each, the first awards of an unprecedented no-strings-attached annual fellowship program designed to keep the area's top visual artists from leaving the state in search of greener pastures.

And while the auto sector is famously limping, sometime late this year or early next, construction crews will break ground on a brand-new light-rail line running up Woodward Avenue.

Neither would have happened without the Troy-based Kresge Foundation, which spearheaded the privately financed streetcar line with an up-front pledge of \$35 million and created and funded the artists' fellowships.

Born of the old Kresge five-and-dime empire -- the predecessor to Kmart -- the international foundation has emerged under its energetic new president Rip Rapson as one of the largest and most-active donors among charitable foundations in Detroit.

"I tell people this all the time," said Matt Cullen, president and CEO of Rock Ventures, who chairs the M1 Rail project. "Kresge is at the center of everything positive going on in Detroit at this time."

Indeed, some say Kresge has morphed into a leader in virtually every discussion on reinventing the Motor City. Under Rapson and his Detroit team leader Laura Trudeau, Kresge has vigorously pursued partnerships with other groups, pushing to see where its assets and strengths can piggyback on what others are already doing.

Tiffany S. Douglas, who administers foundation dollars for the Bank of America, calls Kresge "absolutely" the leading foundation in Detroit today.

"They do top-notch research. They've got a great advocacy and policy voice. Plus," she added, "they do what they do with humility and great humor. And you don't see that a lot."

### **Expanded scope**

Until recently, Kresge's stock in trade was issuing challenge grants -- we'll give you \$1 million if you raise an additional million on your own -- to help nonprofits with building projects. Kresge hasn't abandoned that approach, but now also makes other investments in programs and organizations dealing with health, the environment, education, human services, arts and culture and community development.

Detroit figures at the very center of all this.

Interest in Detroit got a huge boost after 2006 when Rapson arrived from Minneapolis, where he'd been a deputy mayor and later head of the McKnight Foundation.

Under Rapson, Kresge, which has \$2.8 billion in assets and last year distributed \$181 million worldwide, committed to doubling its annual investment in the city of Detroit to about 17 percent of total grants, or \$31 million, at 2008 levels.

Kresge's concerns, of course, extend well beyond the city of Detroit. But Rapson, with his Minneapolis roots, is an unapologetic urban fundamentalist who sees reviving the central city as the inevitable first step toward a greater whole.

"When push comes to shove," he said, "you cannot revitalize the regional economy without focusing your energies along Woodward Avenue, the region's central nervous system."

"Rip is interested in what he refers to as place-based philanthropy," said Steve Hamp, who sits on both the Kresge and Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan boards. "Rather than a little here and a little there, what if you concentrate resources in a specific geographic zone?" At the Community Foundation, president Mariam Noland sees a laudable return to Kresge's urban roots. "When a national foundation located in Troy commits to its core city," Noland said, "I think that's fantastic."

### **Vast local influence**

Today, it's hard to find a major Detroit venture without Kresge's fingerprints on it.

The foundation has invested in the Dequindre Cut, part of the Community Foundation's regional greenways initiative. It's contributed to the College for Creative Studies' satellite campus in the Argonaut Building, the renovation of Eastern Market and creation of the Sugar Hill Arts District, to cite but a few projects.

Such outlays go to the heart of the belief shared by Rapson and Trudeau that building on small successes is the surest way to stitch together a healthy city.

"The challenge here is not so much how to stabilize each of these discretely," Rapson said, "but how to weave a whole."

In this respect, he argues, the proposed streetcar with its dozen stations becomes "a way to create urban coherence." Not only will it help sew together bits of downtown, but -- if the experience of such systems elsewhere holds true -- it should jump-start economic activity around each of the stops.

At Detroit's Skillman Foundation, vice-president of programs Tonya Allen tips her hat to Rapson's boldness. "Kresge has really been willing to take risks," Allen said, "and use their resources in ways other foundations aren't willing to -- and here I'm talking the light rail down Woodward."

Cullen calls the \$35 million committed by Kresge the lynchpin to the light-rail project. "Absent Kresge, it wouldn't have happened," he said.

#### **Other foundations step up**

Kresge, of course, is just one foundation among many on the local scene, and not the only one that's taken a new interest in Detroit. Both the Battle Creek-based Kellogg Foundation and New York's Ford Foundation have boosted their local funding in recent years.

But under Rapson, Kresge has won a reputation for particularly enthusiastic collaboration with other players.

"This is the role we can play," Rapson said, "figuring out forums where we can create coordinated responses to the real burning issues of Detroit."

To that end, Kresge launched the Detroit Neighborhood Forum, which brings together actors from banks to government to philanthropic groups in order to track who's doing what where and strategize ways to maximize results. With Detroit's Hudson-Webber Foundation, Kresge founded an Office of Foreclosure Prevention.

And Kresge, the Ford Foundation and Kellogg Foundation each put up one-quarter of the \$100 million for the New Economy Initiative, a joint foundation effort to move the state beyond the wreckage of the auto industry. (Others, including the Community Foundation that launched the Initiative, contributed the balance.)

#### **Boon to artists**

Still, for all the productive partnerships, the \$25,000 arts fellowships announced today are uniquely Kresge's -- and an unprecedented step, in Michigan at least, to keep talent here in a bad economy.

Those 18 fellowships follow on the heels of a much larger prize that's part of the same strategy, the first-ever Kresge Eminent Artist Award, worth \$50,000, presented last December to longtime Detroit teacher and artist Charles McGee.

Talking in his crowded, industrial studio on West Six Mile, McGee insists on steering talk of his good fortune back to the younger artists who will benefit from the awards.

"I've been in Detroit 74 years, and nothing ever matched this kind of commitment," he said. "It's huge. It's celebration time."

One of today's winners, Detroit artist Cedric Tai, who graduated from Michigan State University in 2007, gives the fellowship's impact on his life a distinctly practical spin.

"This allows me to work every day on art," Tai said. "I'd worried I might have to stop doing

that."

For his part, Rapson sees retaining this sort of talent as key to a regional rebirth.

"You can't imagine the healthy, vibrant Detroit we want without putting the arts at the center," Rapson said. "This is not a corollary or appendage. It has to do with talent, creativity, memory and opportunity."

Jef Bourgeau, who runs Pontiac's Museum of New Art, applauds the fellowships as nothing less than transformational.

"It helps put Detroit on the map in a different way."

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