



**Carol A. Goss**  
**16<sup>th</sup> James A. Joseph Lecture on Philanthropy**  
**April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2007**  
**Seattle, Washington**

**‘The Power of Philanthropy - The Fear of Mediocrity’**



**Carol A. Goss** is president & CEO of the Detroit-based Skillman Foundation, a private independent foundation whose mission is to improve the lives of children in Southeast Michigan by strengthening their schools and neighborhoods.

Involved in philanthropy for the past 20 years, Goss joined The Skillman Foundation in March 1998 as a senior program officer. She was named president & CEO of the Foundation in 2004. She has also worked as a program officer at the Stuart Foundation in San Francisco and as program director at the W. K. Kellogg Foundation in Battle Creek, Michigan.

In addition to running The Skillman Foundation, which has assets of more than \$500 million and an annual grants budget of \$25 million, Goss is active with numerous nonprofits and philanthropy organizations, including: Grantmakers for Children Youth and Families; Association of Black Foundation Executives; Women in Philanthropy; Detroit Area Grantmakers; Detroit Parent Network; Michigan's Children; Council of Michigan Foundations; Court Appointed Special Advocates Advisory Committee; Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee; The Links, Inc., Oakland Chapter; McKinley Foundation; Michigan Aids Fund; Michigan Task Force on the Overrepresentation of Minority Children in Foster Care; Minerva Educational Development Foundation Advisory Group; NAACP; New Detroit, Inc.; Skillman Center for Children; Tomorrow's Child Michigan SIDS, Inc. and the Wayne County Task Force on Foster Care Youth.

Goss's professional career also includes nearly 20 years experience in child welfare, family services, and youth development in Detroit and Oakland, California. A native Detroit, Goss has a BA in sociology and an MSW from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Her personal life and professional career reflects a commitment to children and families.

"Family is very important to me," Goss says. "My husband, Tom, and I have more than 30 children in our extended families. I am passionate about children – especially children who never get onboard the opportunity train that so many American kids ride."

Carol and spouse Thomas have 3 daughters. Anika Goss Foster, Fatima Goss Graves and Maloni Goss, and two grandchildren Gill James Foster and Nena Len Foster.

## **The James A. Joseph Lecture on Philanthropy**

The James A. Joseph Lecture on Philanthropy was established in 1991 to honor this ABFE co-founder, distinguished philanthropic leader, and then president of the Council on Foundations, as well as to celebrate ABFE's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Each year, ABFE's Board of Directors recognizes an outstanding philanthropic leader whose visionary leadership and stewardship of progressive philanthropic ideals further our organization's mission. The Lecture is one illustration of ABFE's continuing commitment to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas about the role of philanthropy in addressing the concerns of Black communities, to highlight for grantmaking institutions the issues and challenges facing Black communities, and to increase public awareness of the longstanding traditions of giving and community building among Black Americans.

The James Joseph Lecture on Philanthropy, held each year with the Council on Foundations Annual Conference, attracts to its audience philanthropic and community leaders and luminaries from around the United States who have professional and personal stakes in shaping philanthropy and the role it plays in strengthening communities around the world.

**Previous James A. Joseph Lecturers include:** *James A. Joseph* in 1991 and 1998, *Franklin Thomas* in 1992, *Dr. Bernard C. Watson* in 1993, *Anna Faith Jones* in 1994, *Elridge W. McMillan* in 1995, *Jean E. Fairfax* in 1996, *Hugh C. Burroughs* in 1999, *Dr. Emmett D. Carson* in 2000, *Dr. Reatha Clark King* in 2001, *Wenda Weekes Moore* in 2002, *Handy Lindsey, Jr.* in 2003, *Lynn Huntley* in 2004, and *Dr. Jordan Hampton* in 2005.

ABFE widely disseminates the text of each lecture, including on the ABFE website. It is hoped broad dissemination of these monographs contributes to productive dialogue about ways the philanthropic community may support the viable, inclusive, sustainable development of Black communities worldwide.

It is our very special pleasure to present to you the 16<sup>th</sup> James A. Joseph Lecturer, Carol. A. Goss, President and CEO of the Skillman Foundation. Her vision and leadership is recognized not only within the ABFE network, but also within the broader philanthropic community. ABFE is particularly proud of her contributions to Black communities throughout her career.

**Judy M. Ford, Chair**  
**Kenneth W. Austin, President**

## **‘The Power of Philanthropy - The Fear of Mediocrity’**

**By Carol A. Goss**

**April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2007**

I’m deeply honored and humbled to give the James Joseph Lecture tonight, and to be part of a group of James Joseph Lecturers whose ranks include the shining stars of African Americans working in philanthropy. I served on the Board of ABFE in the 1990s and worked on the ABFE newsletter with my good friend and colleague, Sylvia Johnson of the Hyams Foundation in Boston. The 1990s were a period of change and growth for ABFE. Many young African Americans were entering the field of philanthropy and the camaraderie, networking and support that were evident were essential in helping all of us to sustain our roles in philanthropy. These connections were very reminiscent of the support so often felt in African-American communities of yesteryear where people like “Big Mama” and “Deacon Brown” provided encouragement and unconditional support. I have always felt that same nurturing embrace with ABFE whose strength resides among its people and their relationships. This nurturing embrace provided the framework for the many projects, studies and initiatives that were developed under the leadership of ABFE. All were important contributions to philanthropy as a whole. In Michigan, we have recently initiated the Michigan Forum of Blacks in Philanthropy, an emerging but influential affinity group. Its work is based on the guiding principles shared by ABFE. This group has been instrumental in bringing Dr. Henry Louis Gates to the 2007 annual conference of the Council of Michigan Foundations. While it is chaired by seasoned Foundation staff, Gerald Smith and I, its innovation, energy and effort are driven by a core group of young people now working for philanthropic organizations. I am proud of all that they are accomplishing.

I would like to acknowledge my family here tonight, and some special colleagues who have made a difference in my philanthropic career of 20 years. Let me acknowledge, also, my other family – the Skillman Foundation – and the Trustees and staff with us this evening, as well as our community partners, other Foundations from Michigan and the Council of Michigan Foundations. Many of these colleagues have joined us in our

efforts to help make Detroit a place where children can go to good schools, live in good neighborhoods, and prepare for successful lives as adults.

I was asked to focus my remarks around the broad topic of how philanthropic professionals and trustees help to strengthen the Black community. In thinking about this charge, it occurred to me that, as African Americans working in the field of philanthropy, we are uniquely challenged to do our best work; to make a difference in the African American community; and to increase access to philanthropic resources. In accepting this challenge, we must not settle for average or ordinary, we must strive for greatness. Our role is to improve outcomes in the African-American community and to bring others along with us. If we are to have the greatest possible impact, it is imperative that we bring our whole selves and our whole experience to philanthropy. The rich African-American experience must be drawn upon if philanthropy is to be successful in supporting African American communities. These experiences will help lead the way to unique innovations and eventually to transformation.

I want to provide you with a simple example of this. In the initial stages of our work in neighborhoods in Detroit, I invited a community activist, Njia Kai, to talk with our trustees about her work. Njia has a very powerful youth development program that is helping the most vulnerable youth in our city. She shared a story about her attendance at a youth development conference and presenting her work. At this conference, she was asked what approach she used to serve children. After some consideration, Njia answered, “The Big Mama” strategy. She went on to explain that she was simply doing for children what she had seen her grandmother, mother and other women in her neighborhood do. Njia was caring for children. She was being a big mama in her neighborhood. Like so many other men and women in communities, Njia was operating as a natural helper in her community. I understood this role in the African American community immediately, just as many of you do, because it was what many unsung heroes—the Big Mamas and even Deacon Browns-- did for me and possibly for you, too. This important role uniquely reflects the African-American experience. At Skillman, we

have now integrated this fully into our work. It is not a traditional strategy; however it is an extremely effective strategy in urban communities. Many foundations would not invest in this strategy because they would not understand it nor understand its “roots.” Throughout my remarks, I will revisit generally the unique influence that African Americans can have in philanthropy today and, more specifically, the need for more Big Mamas or Deacon Browns in both philanthropy and the African-American community.

Philanthropy has changed and grown since I first entered the field some 20 years ago. More African Americans are on staff at foundations and in significant roles of leadership as trustees, presidents and executives. Recent data from the Council on Foundations indicates that 23.2% of program staff at foundations are members of minority groups and a little more than 11% are African Americans. At the leadership level, according to Lynn Burbridge, only 6% of foundation executives are people of color and 10% of trustees. Since we accounted for only 1% in the leadership category in 2000, this is a significant, hopeful increase. We should also note that racial and minority groups receive less than 10% of all foundation grants each year. More African Americans are participating in philanthropy as donors in unique and different ways. We are more engaged than ever before in volunteer efforts and in giving circles. My favorite example of this giving, by the way, is a group of African-American women in Boston called “Divas Uncorked.” They first gathered to taste and enjoy wine as friends. While doing so, they began to plan their charitable activities together, which included raising money to support issues they cared deeply about such as education and scholarships. This example shows how the simple ordinariness of our lives can be transformative for others and can include philanthropy. It also shows the growth of new philanthropy in our community that is complementing the strong tradition of giving in the African-American community that has occurred mostly through our churches and faith-related work. More philanthropic activities are occurring every year and this gives us all hope.

Despite the gains we’ve made in the philanthropic sector, I have the nagging sense that many African Americans working in the field feel alone and isolated. They feel a strong

desire to make a significant difference in the African-American community, but lack the vehicles to do so. At the same time, communities of color, especially African-American communities, are becoming poorer and less stable. As African Americans who are engaged professionally in philanthropy, we cannot allow either of these scenarios to continue. We must draw upon our rich African-American history to integrate who we are and what we know to be true in our communities to address these situations. Just as Deacon Jones or Big Mama would have wrapped their arms around those new in philanthropy, we must do so, too. We must help them understand that, as African Americans in this work, we bear a great responsibility to bring resources, relationships and access to our communities.

The issues that affect our communities are not easily solved. What works in one community doesn't always work in another. What I do know is that each of us has an important role to play and a responsibility to find the answers for our communities. Each of us needs to make the field more responsive and supportive for our brothers and sisters working in philanthropy. Each of us needs to make life better for poor African Americans – particularly young Black men and boys. The needs are great. We must be effective. Georgia O'Keefe said that "Where I was born, and where or how I have lived is unimportant. It is what I have done with where I have been that should be of interest." I love that notion. I challenge myself and my staff, and I challenge each of you to ask yourself that question: "What have I done with where I have been?"

I realize that more than 90 percent of American foundations are white-led, but I am convinced that many foundations want to find a way to work successfully in African-American communities, particularly on the reduction of poverty. Some have become dismayed and disillusioned with strategies that did not produce desired outcomes. But we're the ones who can change that. We can bring innovation that grows out of our deep understanding of our communities to the forefront. We can encourage others to take risks on projects with long-term outcomes. We can introduce community leaders, the Deacon Browns and the Big Mamas, to our Boards and executive staff. We can help others in the field to be patient, while interpreting evaluation indicators. We can help to define

progress in new ways. We can, as African-American professionals working in philanthropy, get in the front of this train and drive an effort that will create sustained change in our communities because it grows out of our uniting the best understandings about change efforts with our understandings about our African-American communities. An important ingredient in this effort is our having higher expectations for our communities.

I grew up in a time when the future of our race was our responsibility. Whatever you did was a reflection on a whole race of people. My parents believed that you must always be a credit to your race. My interpretation of that was I needed to have high goals and aspirations and be successful. If you were not, you would not only disappoint yourself and your family but you would be a disappointment to your race. I suspect that many of you here tonight had similar encouragement from your parents – or other important adults – in your childhood homes. Maybe it came from someone outside of your home, like a Big Mama or Deacon Jones. They all shared this same powerful idea: It was truly up to each of us and all of us, for only our collective successes and shared sense of responsibility would strengthen the African-American community.

My African-American experience as well as my deeply held beliefs about our African-American responsibility helped define the work we are doing in Detroit. I want to tell you now about the Skillman Foundation, what it is doing and how it had to reframe its work and restructure its organization to address the very serious problems that affect far too many children in the African-American community, and especially African-American boys. Poverty is getting worse in Detroit. A third of our residents – and 45 percent of Detroit children – live below the national poverty line. This puts us dead last among big American cities. With the rapidly declining manufacturing sector in Southeast Michigan – particularly automotive-related manufacturing – those numbers aren't likely to get any better anytime soon. Think about that. Nearly half of the children in Detroit are poor. Detroit – a place that for so long was the economic rock for generations of hardworking black folks; a place where, if you were black and somehow found a way to get Detroit,



there was hope of a decent-paying job and food on the table for your family – is now a place with poverty rates worse than rural Mississippi.

Since 1960, The Skillman Foundation has made grants to improve the lives of children in Metropolitan Detroit. Historically, 80 percent of our grantmaking went to large, nonprofit agencies, public schools or public agencies that were working on behalf of children. There were many good projects, and we learned a lot about best practice models. However, none of our grantmaking was sufficient to change the indicators of child well-being and to help restore this mostly African-American city. When I became President in 2004, I was determined to identify a strategy that would acknowledge the work being done on the ground, to pair it with best practice models and to “change the odds” for the children in Detroit. To do this, I knew that I would need a highly skilled and diverse staff who shared my belief in the inherent strengths in the African-American community and a Board who shared the vision that change was possible, given the right ingredients. I am fortunate to have both. Jim Collins in his book, *Good to Great*, states that organizations have to get the right people on the bus and in the right seats. I am fortunate to have both.

The Skillman Foundation is making a difference now because we’re more focused on and more closely aligned with the ordinary citizens we serve. Our new way of working -- of engaging the community -- is a model that I know can work anywhere, and I’m here tonight to speak enthusiastically about it. This model has been around a long time. Its roots go back thousands of years to our African ancestors who embodied the idea of “community,” and to the ancient Hebrews who understood the essence of philanthropy. This model was demonstrated daily during my childhood by the Deacon Jones and Big Mamas who looked out for the whole community rather than for just their selves. As you can see, I didn’t invent this community-based model, but I’m going to use every last bit of energy I have to champion it.

We knew that, if this model of working collaboratively with community were to be successful, the Skillman Foundation could not remain the traditionally organized foundation that responded solely to a set of proposals developed to address a set of pre-

determined guidelines. We continue to change and are remaking ourselves so we can work more strategically with our partners and foster collective action in our community. We have a more diverse staff now that values community, seeks transformative change and works in teams to accomplish that change.

Our plan isn't complicated. Over the next 10 years, our chief priority will be to improve the well-being of children in six key neighborhoods of Detroit. These are neighborhoods where large numbers of children live and where the need is great. Sixty-five thousand children live in these six neighborhoods. Nearly 1/3 of them are poor. Opportunity must also exist in these neighborhoods, and by that I mean, there must be a cadre of community leaders and organizations that are already committed to young people and are willing to work together to transform their neighborhoods on behalf of children. If our model of community engagement succeeds, and we're able to help residents transform their neighborhoods into places where children can prosper, the Foundation, and its partners, can replicate the model in neighborhoods throughout all of Detroit.

We are also attacking the underlying culture of poverty that is so pervasive in Detroit and other parts of the Detroit Metropolitan area. We are helping those who are fighting for basic quality-of-life improvements such as safety, education, removal of abandoned houses and the establishment of routine and reliable trash collection. We are working so that high school graduation will become the norm. We want what should be ordinary to, indeed, be ordinary in our neighborhoods: for young people to live with their parents and for young people to see adults going off to work every morning. We are lifting up the good things in our community, also, such as our world-class culture and arts organizations and programs, the growing number of innovative and effective schools in the City, and the gritty determination to persevere that most Detroiters demonstrate in small ways every day.

At Skillman, we shall continue to be the voice for Detroit's children—who have not had one before—and we shall continue working to improve the education landscape in Detroit and to take risks on those opportunities that have great potential to change children's lives. We are working to break down the structural barriers that prevent lots of

smart kids from succeeding because we want our children in Detroit to grow up believing that success and prosperity are not only possible, but expected.

Accomplishing these goals will not be easy. We know that. We also know that the Skillman Foundation cannot do this work alone. We are working to develop partnerships with other funders, government, the private sector, and ordinary Detroiters.

Some say that we've set the bar too high and doubt that a private foundation – even a foundation with the resources and longevity of The Skillman Foundation – can be a catalyst for such fundamental change. We disagree. We believe foundations are uniquely positioned to take risks. We believe we can change conditions for Detroit children by investing in communities, leveraging other dollars, and bringing other partners – sometimes unlikely partners – into the mix.

Clearly there are risks associated with this effort. Many foundations and foundation boards would look at the Detroit landscape and choose a more cautious and traditional approach. I understand those perspectives, but I took this job because I really wanted to do something that would make a difference for children – particularly the most vulnerable children. The risks of aiming high and failing, it seems to me, pale in comparison to the risks associated with carrying on the status quo. Fear of failure doesn't keep me awake at night. Fear of mediocrity does. These often quoted words from Dr. Benjamin Mays aptly describe my feelings, "It must be borne in mind that the tragedy of life doesn't lie in not reaching your goal. It lies in having no goal to reach. It is not a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream. It is not a disgrace not to reach the stars, but it is a disgrace not to have any stars to reach. Not failure, but low aim is the real sin."

It is my responsibility to the children of Detroit to have high expectations and work towards them on their behalf. No child in Detroit – nor anywhere, for that matter – deserves to grow up in a place where so many adults have closed the door on them. My work and my passion are a debt I pay freely and without burden to the great men and women like the Deacon Joneses and Big Mamas in the African American community. As African Americans in philanthropy, we must ask ourselves whether our contributions are making African American communities stronger and whether we are paying

appropriate homage to those who came before us without the rich resources of philanthropic institutions that we have currently.

Would the change at Skillman have occurred if I had not become president? I am not sure. The Board of Trustees was ready for someone to articulate a new vision for the Foundation's work. Will it continue after I am gone? Absolutely! I challenge each of you in your work to reach for your goal and fulfill your dream. If we collectively harness our intellect, energy and effort, we can make the differences that will strengthen the African American community and will bring others along with us.

I'm privileged to lead such a dynamic and determined organization, which in three years will celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Rose Skillman, our founder, spent much of her time worrying about the needs of children – especially vulnerable children. She's been gone for nearly a quarter-century, but her unwavering advocacy for children carries on.

Duke Ellington said there are only two types of music: Good music and the other kind. The same is true about philanthropy. ABFE's mission is simple but clear: Promote effective and responsive philanthropy in Black communities. Good philanthropy is effective philanthropy. At the Skillman Foundation, we want to be good and we are determined to be effective.