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NEWS & COMMENTARY

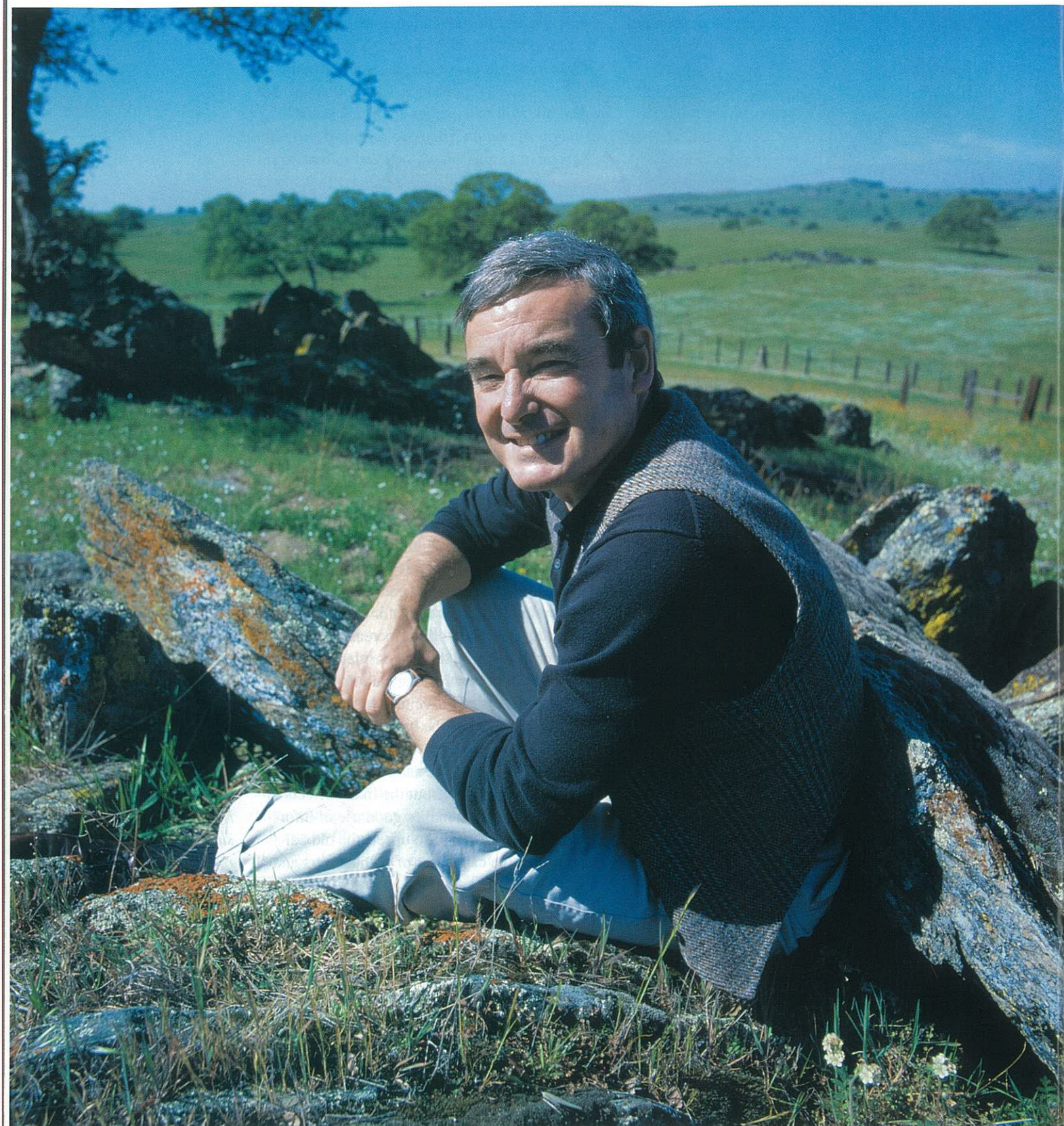
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**Does Your Strategy
Tell You Which Way
to Turn?**

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A CONVERSATION WITH...



Craig E. McGarvey pictured east of Modesto in California's Central Valley.

Craig E. McGarvey

BY ALLAN R. CLYDE

California's Central Valley—a 430-by-50-mile region stretching south to north from Bakersfield to Redding—may just be the biggest U.S. dichotomy.

It's the richest region of agricultural production in the world—providing 25 percent of the food consumed across the nation. Yet it's home to some of the poorest Californians, many of them unnaturalized legal permanent residents suffering unemployment rates hovering nearly 50 percent higher than state averages for 30 years. Now people and companies seeking affordability are eyeing the valley, causing threats of sprawl—congestion, pollution, water shortages and the loss of prime agricultural land—to loom large. Yet the area remains one underserved by philanthropy.

On his first trip to the valley in 1995, non-Spanish speaking Craig E. McGarvey (James Irvine Foundation program director for civic culture) met with members of a county civic action league sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee. Through translators, they told him how intimidated and humiliated they felt trying to learn English in classes provided by the local public schools, and how they'd created their own naturalization classes. That day, as farmworkers' children ran from their school buses across the grass against a background of the snow-capped Sierras, McGarvey and his new community colleagues got a vision for what was to become the Central Valley Partnership for Citizenship (CVP).

Instead of devising a program to bring *to* the valley, the foundation looked *within* the valley and convened community organizations—many of which had either never met or had always directly competed—that realized they were all working toward similar goals and could learn from one another.

CVP's membership has doubled to the current roster of 12, representing a multitude of focuses, ethnic groups, personalities, work styles and approaches to action. To some in philanthropy, they were a high-risk, "three-strike" lot—untested grassroots groups in a rural area representing the concerns of poor and disenfranchised immigrants. But McGarvey believed in their ability to collaborate and encourage civic participation as a means toward naturalization and community building.

Empowered by Irvine, CVP partners now run their own quarterly meetings and task forces, and communicate through e-mail as well as a common Web site (www.citizenship.net). They've also created the Pan Valley Institute, where immigrants learn eventually how to influence public policy. CVP also administers a small grants program to support other grassroots efforts encouraging civic participation in even more rural areas. Not only did McGarvey put his neck on the line to fund this partnership, he made two-year funding commitments to them—and then turned the implicit power relationship on its head, making the *grantees* grantmakers.

Maybe that's why five CVP partners turned out to meet me—some from as far as four hours away—after hearing I was to interview McGarvey, winner of the 2001 Robert W. Scrivner Award for Creative Grantmaking.

Juanita Ontiveros of the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, a CVP partner, summed up the group's feelings: "Craig is not the usual funder; he made us feel like equals. He even learned Spanish—the way people *speak* it. He's a good teacher—talks when he needs to, but listens more. Most of all, he's our friend, *nuestro amigo*."

■ Your career has taken turns through engineering and academia. What drew you to philanthropy?

The question that fascinated me for two decades in schools was, "How do institutions for learning turn themselves into communities?" In philanthropy, what fascinates me is how communities turn themselves into places of learning.

■ How would you define civic participation and civic culture?

The working hypothesis is that democracy gets built as people build their communities. Community building is the process through which people come together across lines that could divide them to collectively identify the issues that are of interest to them—what they want to change in order to improve quality of life in their neighborhoods—then, to participate collectively in the shared experience of making and implementing those plans.

CVP is finding problems that are vital enough to draw people out of their living rooms and into meeting rooms, broad enough to draw people across all these dividing lines, and manageable enough so that they can have some success, which will keep them going—doing the work in such a way that it helps leaders emerge. Any problem is simply an opportunity to meet two goals: getting people problem solving together, and using the problem solving to get people educating themselves.

■ What are some of the challenges?

A lot of the work has been trying to find the right language. But as soon as you get new language, it lasts about a nanosecond before it loses its currency. One of the images that I've used recently with my colleagues here has been barn raising. Long ago, across the West,

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the only way you could get your barn built was if all your neighbors participated in helping to raise your barn. So the motivating force was, "Hey, if I help my neighbor, my neighbor is going to help me later."

And so a barn got built, a good barn. You could analyze the barn on all kinds of measures about how good a barn it is, but the important thing is that all these people in the community came together to do it together. They built relationships with one another and they learned how to build barns. So, when it became possible to order your barn from Sears Roebuck it was the same strong barn, but you lost the community building aspect of barn raising.

■ **Have you found reluctance to working with immigrants, especially in California with the political climate that surrounds immigration issues?**

California has had some blips on the monitor of political backlash to immigrants that might represent not particularly progressive thinking for a society—for example, Proposition 187 in the 1990s and other more recent propositions—but Irvine's focus has stayed on civic participation and not the policies themselves. The issues that people work on have to be decided by them. It's not project-driven by us.

■ **Foundations didn't heavily fund the Central Valley—how did you convince your board that this was worthwhile?**

We felt that it was a niche of opportunity *because* there really wasn't much "philanthropic resource" out there. Irvine had done a lot of work with immigrants, starting in 1986 when the Immigrant Reform and Control Act was passed. We made a lot of community investments to help community-based organizations build their abilities to get amnestied people who were in the country into the pipeline for naturalization.

That work eventually became CVP.

■ **Do you have to deal with the citizenship or language issues first, before you can move on to civic participation?**

Ideally, people are learning English as

they are preparing to naturalize and participating in civic life.

■ **What was the challenge of bringing together such a diverse cross-section of community players?**

It's a matter of looking for the opportunities that people see as win/win, that getting into a relationship with other organizations at this time serves their self-interest, moving toward that goal.

■ **How did Irvine help facilitate that?**

The theory has been that if the foundation got into a grantmaking relationship with the organizations to such an extent that there was some core support there, and the individual organizations did not have to look over their shoulders all the time to try and figure out where their next grant was coming from or sweat out their payrolls on a monthly basis, there would be a relaxation of some of the tensions that are sort of endemic to our field—that people feel they have to compete with one another for the limited resources. Therefore, an atmosphere more fertile for collaboration would be created.

■ **Were CVP members reluctant to challenge you even though you're supposed to be equals?**

Well, they are certainly not shy about telling me when I'm wrong! But, in the partnership there's one and only one organization that buys its way to the table. It's us—Irvine. And that never goes away. What we essentially do with the money is buy our way into relationships with community geniuses, and the problem is that the only tool we have—the money—inherently distorts the work.

Everybody knows if Irvine says something at one of the meetings, that it's probably not going to get dropped. So it's all about nuance and subtlety, and figuring out how to behave; how to get to that edge of the spotlight, to be actively engaged in the idea exchange, but to do it in such a way that is not heavy-handed or overstated.

■ **How did you go about eliminating "foundation arrogance"?**

I'm convinced that you'll never eliminate the distortion of the money, but

you can be vigilant in trying to minimize it. In philanthropy, people return my phone calls. That never happened to me before. Now, the only people who don't return my calls are in other foundations.

■ **How does CVP work toward all the players being viewed as equals?**

CVP is as gloriously messy as any other human enterprise. Clearly there have been issues over time. There's one organization right now that's feeling as though the vision really resides in Irvine and a couple of the partner agencies. Having learned that, the partnership reached out to that agency and tried to draw it back in, and tried to find out what the organization wanted out of the partnership.

■ **Part of your responsibility as program director is to evaluate program strategies. How have you done this, and were there any surprising results?**

In partnership with Irvine's office of evaluation, we contracted the Aguirre Group to get out into the community and talk to our constituents to see whether what we thought was happening with them was happening, and to get recommendations for how we can strengthen ourselves.

For instance, the evaluators told us that over two years we got 10,000 people naturalization assistance. But they also said that we needed to follow up with them better or we weren't going to know whether they actually passed the test. One of the big problems is that it takes 18 months to two years to get there because of big backlogs in the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) bureaucracy.

And as a result, now there's a whole, management-information system technical-assistance package in the CVP to enable us to follow the progress of folks as they naturalize.

■ **What happens with the evaluators' recommendations?**

The grants are in two-year increments, so every two years we go to the board with a new set of recommendations, and



McGarvey in the San Francisco-based James Irvine Foundation offices.

the institutions in the partnership develop new proposals based on what we've learned and what we're hoping will happen. It becomes a period of high leverage in our interaction, because we can get ideas on the table and really try to make things better.

■ **You're a proponent of the "greenhouse" vs. the "blueprint" approach to the learning process? What is the difference?**

The "blueprint" gets created in foundation boardrooms with the staff, and then it gets taken out to the community—and it might not have relationship to the practice. At best, then, it wastes money and people's time. At worst, it does damage to what people are trying to accomplish. Arguably, that's philanthropy's Achilles heel, our feet of clay. It's where the prevailing winds of the money will force us to go unless we are very careful.

Trying to get the money into the community in such a way that the people who are doing the work themselves are learning and growing and interacting with the theory that they are developing as they go along, and having that theory turned into knowledge they own and that enables them to improve their practice—that's what the CVP has called the *greenhouse* process.

■ **What would you say has been CVP's most creative partnership project?**

There was a statute called 245(i), which enabled people to start the naturalization process from within the United States—even if they had slipped in here

in a way that wasn't all that kosher.

The statute was "sunsetting" a few years ago, and in combination with changes in the immigration laws in 1996, it meant that people would have to go back to their home country to start the naturalization process. They would also face either a three- or ten-year bar from coming back to the United States. Families were going to be split up.

So CVP had people signing petitions, up and down the valley. They also communicated with various advocacy and organizing groups around the country. They got 12,500 signatures, but probably the best story happened in Tulare County. Through the Tulare County Civic Action League, which held car washes and dances, CVP raised \$7,000, and sent a delegation of farm workers to Washington. They met with everybody—from Newt Gingrich on down, and as a result of the efforts around the country, the statute was extended.

So thousands more people got started in the naturalization process. That was another barn raised. It was electrifying for people in the community.

■ **How long was 245(i) extended?**

Well, it got extended for several months at that time, and it actually has come back to life here for a limited period at the beginning of 2001. So, the CVP is back out there getting the correct word out to folks and getting people actively engaged, to get them started in the naturalization process, and using it as an organizing opportunity.

■ **So, are there governmental agencies in the partnership?**

No, although one of HUD's community builders is an active partner, but there are all kinds of government agencies involved. INS is the big one. CVP partners hold briefings with the INS, and over time—the evaluators cited this—they have made INS a more customer-friendly place for immigrants.

■ **Has there been any reaction from CVP's constituents to the whole 2000 election fiasco?**

People see their vote counts, and people see that unless they are vigilant and

active, the voting machines might not work in their poor community. So you'd better make sure that the machines are ready the next time you want to vote.

■ **Is voter registration a part of the civic participation efforts?**

Not funded by the foundation, but definitely. The Sacramento Valley Organizing Community, for instance, which is one of the agencies in the partnership, is a faith-based community organizing effort affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation.

They had a big voter registration drive. Then, working with the California Institute for Rural Studies, they demonstrated that lots more people voted in that election than in the election before.

■ **What about the \$10,000 Scrivner award? Any interesting plans for that?**

As a consequence of two, new, very progressive policies of Irvine in 2001, we can leverage that money up. The first policy is that we now have a 3-to-1 match for any employee contribution. So that turns \$10,000 into \$40,000.

A second new policy is that members of staff get to make discretionary grants; and for somebody with my tenure, you get to make as much as \$10,000. So that adds another ten, and that's \$50,000. Fifty thousand dollars, if you invest it wisely, would produce, let's say, 5 percent annually. That's \$2,500 annually. So what we're going to do is give one of the organizations in the partnership this \$50,000 to invest, and the partnership is going to create an annual, perpetual \$2,500 award for an immigrant leader promoting civic participation in the valley.

Irvine also agreed to make a \$50,000 matching grant, increasing the endowment to \$100,000. So each year, there will be not only the \$2,500 award, but also \$2,500 to run the program.

Just like the CVP's grants program, this award will enable the partnership to have one more thing that it does together, strengthening itself. It's one more way to reach out and create relationships throughout the valley. ■