***Transcription sponsored by Cuyahoga Valley National Park***

**Karen Grindall** [00:00:00] Steve's gonna handle the recording and as long as the mic is... As long as you're not bobbing back and forth... The mic is a very wonderfully sensitive mic. You don't even have to worry about it.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:00:11] Okay, sounds good.

**Karen Grindall** [00:00:12] Alright. Okay. So if you'll start off by telling us who you are and who you represent today.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:00:18] Sure. I'm Bob Eckardt. I work at the Cleveland Foundation.

**Karen Grindall** [00:00:23] And Bob, when were you born?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:00:25] I was born [...], 1951.

**Karen Grindall** [00:00:28] So birthday coming up.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:00:29] Coming up, right.

**Karen Grindall** [00:00:30] Yeah. And where were you born?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:00:32] I was born in New York City. Actually, my parents were living in New Jersey at the time, but the nearest hospital was across the river in New York City.

**Karen Grindall** [00:00:40] In New York? Okay. Where in New Jersey?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:00:43] Actually we were living at Fort Lee, which is the New Jersey side of the George Washington Bridge.

**Karen Grindall** [00:00:48] It sure is. And the reason that you moved to Ohio, you did as a child or you did as an adult?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:00:56] I did it after graduate school. I was recruited for a job in Cleveland. Had done my master's in Michigan and was recruited here.

**Karen Grindall** [00:01:05] Okay. So you lived on the East Coast...

**Robert Eckardt** [00:01:07] Until I went away to college. And then four years in the Midwest and two years overseas and two years in Michigan and then Ohio.

**Karen Grindall** [00:01:18] Oh wow. And how long have you been with the Cleveland Foundation?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:01:20] It will be twenty-six years on July 1st.

**Karen Grindall** [00:01:23] That's about the same length as the National Park.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:01:27] Right, just about the same, right,

**Karen Grindall** [00:01:30] It is about the same. Can you tell us what you remember when you first came here as far as the beginning of the national park?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:01:36] Sure. Well the foundation's first involvement with the National Park was through a group called the Peninsula Association, which was trying to lobby essentially for the creation of a national park or at least for the protection of the property between Cleveland and Akron, with a sense there was a lot of development pressure and the foundation had made some grants to the Peninsula Association. And then when it looked like the park was going to happen, the foundation made some grants to the Trust for Public Land in order to purchase some of the critical pieces of property, which then were conveyed to the park. And it was a more or less an idea at that point when we started getting involved with it.

**Karen Grindall** [00:02:23] When you were with the foundation at that time period, how did you see what you thought was going to happen with the park? Did you think it was a doable... How did you precieve it?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:02:37] Well, I think we perceived it as one of those high-risk, high-return kinds of grants when we first made the grant to the Peninsula Association, we didn't know if it'd work out or not. And there were a number of hurdles that had to be overcome to get there. But I think we saw that if it could work, it would be a great addition to the region.

**Karen Grindall** [00:03:04] What were some of those hurdles that you were perceiving about it?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:03:07] Well, no one knew whether you could get it through Congress as a national park. Obviously, John Seiberling was a tremendous resource to get it done, but still only one vote when it comes time to to get the bill passed. There weren't as... The kind of the idea of the national park having as much of an urban presence was pretty unusual. Other than some of the major historic sites, Statue of Liberty, etc., the National Park [Service] was pretty much in Yosemite and Yellowstone and kind of the true natural splendors, but far away from the population sites. And so the idea of the National Park Service having a presence in an area like this was very unusual. And of course, it also involved cooperation between Cleveland and Akron, which wasn't or which wasn't so easy to do. Still isn't so easy to do, but perhaps was harder in those days. So...

**Karen Grindall** [00:04:10] Can you explain the foundation's relationship to northeast Ohio? Is it confined mainly to Cleveland, or do you perceive yourself as a regional entity that needs to pull everything together? How do you... How does the foundation perceive...?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:04:29] Well, we're predominantly Cleveland-focused in that we... As a community foundation, you're getting money from lots of donors as opposed to a single donor. And essentially people are saying, having made my fortune in Cleveland and wanting to give back, I give money to the Cleveland Foundation. So our focus is Cleveland. But over the years, our focus has grown and changed and it varies a bit in the different program areas. So we recognize that the environment's a little bit different than human services. So we're more regional in the environment and in economic development than, for example, we are in Human Services where we wouldn't work with very often with the YMCA in downtown Akron, but we might work on a large environmental regional effort.

**Karen Grindall** [00:05:24] When we talked about the National Park, one of those entities that is there is Cuyahoga Valley Environmental Education Center.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:05:35] Mhm.

**Karen Grindall** [00:05:35] I understand that you have been very involved with the beginnings of that. Can you talk to us about that?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:05:43] Yes, we provided one of the original grants for the renovation of the property. I think there were probably a half dozen funders who provided some initial support. The... I will tell you that that was one of the few grants that I've worked on where our board got a lot of nasty letters from people opposing the grant. And they were really from the neighbors who didn't want the environmental center there and had all kinds of horror stories of how terrible it would be that they sent to members of our board. And usually boards of foundations get mostly thank you notes as opposed to complaining notes. So... But our board wasn't deterred and realized that the regional resource of really getting kids into the national park was worth, worth working on. So...

**Karen Grindall** [00:06:46] And in hindsight how do you feel about your decision on doing it?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:06:51] Well, I think in hindsight it was a great decision. I think the the education center has more than met our expectations. And, you know, and I think, you know, kind of the neighbors concerns were proven not to be so dramatic. I've never seen as many buses lined up on the road that they were afraid would occur. I suppose some days there are more buses coming on, drop off and pickup day, but at least some of their sense of how terrible it would be doesn't seem to have come true. And I think the, you know, since then the center has evolved in other ways, including the summer camp and other things that were not originally envisioned when the education center was created.

**Karen Grindall** [00:07:42] But you and I talked earlier. You mentioned to me that one of your children was involved in one of the programs there. Tell us about that?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:07:50] Sure. Our youngest daughter spent a couple of summers in the summer arts program as a camper and then went back as, I'm not sure what it was called, counselor and training or something, where she [crosstalk] in the summer and in the... She's a musician and so really focused on the music parts of the arts camp, so, very good experience for her. That was many years after we'd been involved in the grant. At the time I was involved in the initial grant, I never thought I'd have a child who'd go through the program, but it was great to see it from the other side as well. And then several years after some of the initial support, the foundation also played a role in the November Lodge, which was a significant addition to the facility and recognized that they just didn't have the classrooms and other things they really needed to to meet their, to meet the opportunity they had before them.

**Karen Grindall** [00:08:51] And the foundation still involved with the CVEEC?

**Karen Grindall** [00:08:55] You know, we're still involved to some degree. We have some funds at the foundation that provide scholarship support. And we've been working with the Cuyahoga Valley National Park Association on a couple of efforts as well, which, some of which involved the education center, some of which are broader than the education center, so...

**Karen Grindall** [00:09:18] Talk to me about the relationship of the foundation with Cuyahoga Valley National Park Association.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:09:26] Well, I think the relationship's been numerous. For a while the association essentially was our conduit because working directly with the Department of Interior to set private sector dollars proved to be harder than it should be in terms of... You wouldn't think it would be hard to give money to the government, but it turns out it's actually pretty hard to do in terms of what has to be signed and various other kind of legal documents. And so a lot of the work was through the association. And then a few years ago, they participated in a program we have that helps nonprofits develop kind of business plans for ways that they might generate income off of businesses. And they've been... Their model was actually using the Environmental Education Center for other activities, retreats and other things that it could be rented out for. And they've been very successful in using that to generate some additional income for the year for the association.

**Karen Grindall** [00:10:33] And the model that you just put that they're using, is that an unusual model as far as a nonprofit using the business model to generate income?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:10:47] Well, we've been... I think we've had three cohorts now of nonprofits that have received technical assistance through the foundation to investigate business models and to try to put business models in place that can kind of diversify their funding streams. Some have worked better than others. I think the Cuyahoga Valley National Park Association has been one of the more successful in making their business model work for them.

**Karen Grindall** [00:11:15] So as a partner with them in that by financially supporting them you recommend their model to other organizations, is that part of the role that you play or does someone else play that role?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:11:34] No, we play that role. They actually get technical assistance through a group in Washington, D.C. called, boy, I think it's called Share Our Strength, which is one of the, which was a hunger program in Washington that was very successful and kind of using their hunger program to reach out to businesses and generate income and is run by a guy named Billy Shore, who's been featured in Time magazine and others as a social entrepreneur. And so we kind of use them to do this training and we obviously can't fund all the nonprofits that want the training. But then we also try to connect other nonprofits with successful models in Cleveland, and I believe the Cuyahoga Valley Association has had several groups come out and look at their business model and see if there are things they can learn from it.

**Karen Grindall** [00:12:27] Which obviously benefits all of us.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:12:29] Right.

**Karen Grindall** [00:12:33] Can you explain to us how you have or how your life has been involved with ecology or with outdoors, or were you an outdoors kid [Robert laughs] when you were little or were you an indoors kid?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:12:52] I think when I was growing up, everyone was more of an outdoors kid in that you were always going out to play baseball in the street or whatever. But I wouldn't say I was kind of an organized outdoors kind of kid. I mean, it's more went in the backyard and played and went to your friend's house and went to the park kind of effort. My background is actually in healthcare, both my master's and my doctorate are in public health. And I came to the Cleveland Foundation to do the health grantmaking. And about a couple of years after I arrived at the foundation, our board asked me to look into environmental grantmaking. So I looked at what a number of other foundations were doing and laid out what we might do and in the way that sometimes happens. And the board said, great, why don't you do it? So I added environment to my portfolio and took on a number of groups in this region that might be kind of defined as environment. And our focus really wasn't environmental health. Even though I was doing health and environment, it was kind of health and kind of a focus on open space and parkland and protection of critical resources and that kind of piece of the environment, as well as working with groups like Shaker Nature Center or the Lake Erie Nature and Science Center, kind of some of the providers of environmental education. So I didn't start into the environment or the ecology field. I kind of got it added to my portfolio over time.

**Karen Grindall** [00:14:41] So do you get out into the park?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:14:43] I do, not as much as I wish, but I get out at least a few times a year. Always nice to be invited to a meeting down there and build in enough time that you can at least take a short walk and try to get down there occasionally to get onto the Towpath Trail. So I get out, but probably not as much as I should.

**Karen Grindall** [00:15:08] Are there some other projects within the National Park that you have found a passion or very pleasurable ones that you would enjoy watching evolve?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:15:21] You know, we, we were along with the Gund Foundation the funders of the Countryside Initiative, which is a very interesting initiative in the National Park, which really was raised off the question of what should happen with urban parks. And, you know, they transfer to the park service, they're, they're not wild. They're already, they've been farmed, they've been in use. And if you do nothing, of course, they'll return to their wild state. And John Debo, the superintendent of the park, raised the question of that's really what we should have happen here or not, or whether people didn't want to open vistas and the fields that they could look across and all that. And in Europe, a lot of the national parks are kind of active farms and actively involved. And so the Countryside Initiative was looking at what should we do in the Cuyahoga Valley long run? Should it be allowed to just go to woods or should it be kind of sustained with the kind of vistas and other things that people appreciated when it became a national park and really led to the reintroduction of farming in the park. I think there's seven or so farms now that are active down there and has become kind of a model for other some other national parks now. But this was the pioneer park doing it, and it took a lot longer than anyone thought. It wasn't something the Department of Interior had a lot of experience with, leasing park land to be farmed, dealing with, you know, coming up with the lease that made sense to the government, protected its interests as a park, but also was economically feasible for farmers and others. And that had kind of an appropriate mix of protection versus recognizing that when you use property, you use it too, you know, even driving a tractor on it has certain impacts on the land, even if you do it in a sustainable model. And that's been really kind of interesting to see unfold. I think we all were way over optimistic. And as I recall, the original proposal was in a year there'd be seven. I think it took three years before there was one farm that had been reopened. But I think it's a very good way to kind of combined history and agriculture and sustainability and parkland in an urban setting that may make more sense than just, you know, buying the land and letting it go completely to be deep, heavy woods in twenty years.

**Karen Grindall** [00:18:28] We see that happen so easily.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:18:30] Right, right. Which is interesting for people to see happen. But on the other hand, I think for a park where people are going to be driving along roads and, you know, they want the space where they can picnic or the space where they kind of get the vistas across the valley. And again, when people are saying this was important land to protect, it wasn't virgin forests they were protecting. It was kind of this sense of open space and the valleys and the views and other kinds of things.

**Karen Grindall** [00:19:01] In what way did money from the foundation support the farming?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:19:08] Well, the work... The foundation money predominantly supported someone to be the manager of the whole project and to work with the National Park Service on which property should be reopened, work with them on the lease development, finding the farmers, kind of running the lottery once you have the property of who would get it, doing the checks to make sure that they're still meeting the rules of the lease because the lease does have certain sustainability things in terms of chemicals and other things that you can and can't use in the park, and working with the farmers on business plans that worked within the lease. So it was all that kind of supportive function. And as I said, that was much more complicated than anyone thought it would be. That was not someone who National Park Service, because they'd never done this, had money to hire. And so we had to find someone who could kind of understand agriculture or understand parks and could figure out how this would all work.

**Karen Grindall** [00:20:18] And so does that person who does that person then initially report to?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:20:25] You know, I'm not sure I can answer that now. It was originally housed through the predecessor, the Cuyahoga Valley National Park Association. And I think it's still there, but I'm not totally sure.

**Karen Grindall** [00:20:38] Do you have a favorite one of those farms that you, it's like, oh, this is this is really unique?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:20:45] Well, I guess I always have kind of a warm spot for the first one that opened because I was there walking the property before the bill, watching the house be renovated, watching the barn be renovated, hearing all the stories of the complicated negotiations of what the government would pay for, what the landowner would pay for, how the lease would be structured. So although I hear very nice things about some of the new ones an herb farm, a winery, and some others, I actually haven't seen those yet, so. I know some of my staff have been down to see them, but I haven't. But that first one's always the challenging one because at that point, you know, we were kind of taking a role that foundations often take, the kind of risk money, but we didn't know if it would actually work or not.

**Karen Grindall** [00:21:36] Within the foundation, would you consider, how would you consider the national park investment? As high risk, low risk, medium risk?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:21:47] I think it's become lower risk over time, but as I said in the very beginning it was pretty high risk. And there was then a number of periods over the history when there were threats to the national park. During the Reagan administration, there was a desire to spin off all the urban parks and either sell them or turn them over to the states to run. There was a whole hit list of national parks that the head of the Department of Interior didn't think the government and the federal government should be running. And the Cuyahoga Valley one was on that list every year. So, you know, we were kind of behind the scenes working with people to continue to make the case as to why this was important and that there was a role for the national park in having a park that a lot of people visited year-round that was close to population centers, et cetera. The foundation a number of years ago won the Leadership Award from the National Parks and Recreation Association. And one of the reasons we won it was for kind of our role early on in the creation of the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. We also were recognized for some of our work on the lakefront parks in Cleveland and the transfer of those to the state. And so I think, you know, we felt good about it. But, you know, sometimes when you look back from history, you forget that things didn't have to unfold the way they did because they seem kind of obvious. So to a lot of people growing up now, it probably seems obvious that there should be a big park between Cleveland and Akron, and that this should all be protected land, and that the national park should have a presence and that kind of work, and there should be an environmental education center there. And none of those were obvious to anyone in the beginning. It really took people of vision and then mobilizing both dollars from largely the foundation community and then kind of leadership on the political and other fronts to make it happen.

**Karen Grindall** [00:24:11] Now, how much does the foundation get involved with the political side when you are committed to a project such as this such as this, such as CVEEC? I'm well aware of the threats from the neighbors up there...

**Robert Eckardt** [00:24:30] Right.

**Karen Grindall** [00:24:31] The tombstones that were put out...

**Robert Eckardt** [00:24:31] Right.

**Karen Grindall** [00:24:32] And the black ribbons.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:24:36] Right.

**Karen Grindall** [00:24:36] How much do you get involved in that political side? Does the foundation feel this is the right thing for us to be doing?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:24:47] Well, foundations are governed under a tax code that we have to be very careful about not being involved in advocacy around a particular bill. So foundations can never weigh into elections of individuals, so we can't take a position in any kind of race. We can comment if invited on pending legislation and we can take some degree of position on issues, but not on particular bills. So we are very sensitive to that. And so we kind of had to mind our Ps and Qs appropriately. On the other hand, foundations also can do a lot of convening, and we played a role in bringing a lot of leadership in the region out to see the park, working with the Cuyahoga Valley Association and originally Peninsula Association. As I said, we brought dollars to bear that began to protect property, and then when the government started buying property began to protect some of the fringes around the park so that you had the potential to add to it and expand it out from kind of the smaller original footprint, I think we've been, you know, strong supporters politically in the small P sense, the kind of building constituency for the park, but never kind of in a way that would suggest we had stepped over the line in terms of advocating on behalf of a particular bill. So I guess that's kind of how I'd say we walked the line. We do view our role as being not just a passive funder role, but being a leader on important issues. And so we would play that role, where appropriate, in the history of the park.

**Karen Grindall** [00:26:55] I know that Cuyahoga Valley Environmental Education Center has been strongly received by school systems who went a little dip for a while when they came out with the state exams and everybody [crosstalk] was so afraid with... [inaudible] not feeling now that they have moved through that fear... [inaudible] So what would you like to see for their future, to sustain it as the number of children that are there now? What would be the vision to see the grow for more children?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:27:31] I'm not sure I know the answer to that. I think that what we've been seeing is a strong sense of the importance of building a sustainable funding strategy, be it scholarship funds and others, recognizing that schools always find it hard to find those kind of supplemental dollars, and particularly the urban school districts find it hard. So we have a number of funds at the foundation that support scholarships. We actually hold some endowment money that has been contributed to support the association that supports scholarships. So at a minimum, I think sustaining it and sustaining it in a way that it doesn't just become something for the well-to-do districts, but that, you know, the districts that are facing it, facing financial problems, can participate is really important. I've been struck, having been out there sometimes, you know, with kids being there who really have very little sense of nature at all. You know, some of them can't sleep because it's too quiet or too noisy in terms of animals and, you know, don't have any sense of, you know, where food comes from or anything at all. And so I think that, you know, from our perspective it would be critical to that. Now, whether they can grow and grow it, they would have to tell you more. But I wouldn't want to see them grow it in a way that threatens kind of the core or that it becomes kind of just an elite program.

**Karen Grindall** [00:29:21] Let's go back to the Cleveland Foundation because we all know that you are very important as many foundations are to the region. Tell me the mission of the Cleveland Foundation.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:29:35] Sure. Well, the foundation really has a three-part mission. We exist to build community endowment, which, some of which is our endowment, so we exist to support worthy community projects through grantmaking, and we support to provide leadership on key community issues. And so our mission captures all three of those. The Cleveland Foundation was the first community foundation in the country. And so we still take the sense of being a pioneer seriously and like to think we're, although we're the oldest community foundation because we're the first, we're also flexible and nimble and change over time to reflect the changes in our community. And so, and we're the largest foundation in the state of Ohio and the third largest community foundation in the country. Yes.

**Karen Grindall** [00:30:39] Can you tell us about some of the other projects or fundings that you would like to brag about [Robert laughs] that the Cleveland Foundaton has done because I think it does this make a big difference in the relationship to even the Earth and the land and the ecology,.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:30:57] Right.

**Karen Grindall** [00:30:57] All of it fits together.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:30:59] Right.

**Karen Grindall** [00:31:00] Can you share with us some of those joys?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:31:03] Sure. Well, I think the Cleveland Foundation's supported so many things over the years and from efforts to strengthen Cleveland's neighborhoods to efforts around regional economic development as communities faced the challenges that a lot of Rust Belt cities have faced. The... I think personally, I've been involved in a lot of interesting things from initial work in AIDS and HIV back in the mid 1980s when the disease was known but the causes and the progression of it weren't known and there weren't very many people willing to step up and work on it because no one wanted to be identified as the AIDS whatever, AIDS hospital, AIDS service provider, AIDS whatever, and really trying to help this community think through and put in place what the service system should be for people with AIDS and HIV. Should it be mainstreamed through existing agencies or should there be separate agencies created? So that was a significant part of work we did. We've done some very significant work around trying to improve the quality of care for older people with chronic conditions. Could be nursing home care. Led a major effort to reduce the use of restraints in nursing homes and to kind of make Cleveland maybe not a restraint-free community, but much less use of restraint. There was a period where very high percentages of people in nursing homes were restrained and they were... It was being done for their safety. But in fact, it actually made it more dangerous for people. But you had to change mindsets of administrators and deal with concerns about would they be sued and how could you do this without having more staff and all that and led kind of a significant effort that that really made Cleveland one of the first communities to have as an overall goal, reducing restraints in nursing homes. So there's been a whole range. It's kind of hard to pick out just a couple. I do think that the whole area where the foundation, as I said, did, was recognized in the American Parks and Recreation Association for Leadership around kind of open space,. We're currently a major funder of the Trust for Public Land, and they played a role and taking over the old Coliseum site and restoring that to the national park. They're now working on protecting key parcels in the region, whether it's wetlands out by Sandusky Bay or whatever, and they played a significant role in protecting the sixteen hundred acres of Edison Woods. And we are a major funder of their work. So I think over time I've become more, I'm more recognizing the importance of some of the open space and land protection work that we're doing.

**Karen Grindall** [00:34:23] Public Lands and Trust [sic] has become a funded partner in your philosophy?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:34:30] Yes, the Trust for Public Land is a national group, but we... And in almost every case I'm talking about, we were partnering with the Gund Foundation, but the two foundations got them to open their office, targeted just on Northeast Ohio, and have supported their land protection fund. We have a million dollars that is available to the Trust for Public Land for land protection. So rather than identify an important piece of land and then go raise the money, they have the money up front, which in the real estate business is often helpful because you need earnest money or, you know, a deposit to hold something there. Now, leading a major effort on completion of the Towpath Trail and the creation of the Canal Basin Park in downtown Cleveland on the river, again using funds from the Cleveland Foundation to do that.

**Karen Grindall** [00:35:27] Can you tell us more about that particlar project 'cause we learned a little bit about it yesterday? Could you tell us a little more?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:35:34] Well, we're right now at the point where with Steelyard Commons and others, there's been kind of a significant movement of the Towpath closer to downtown Cleveland. We've been supporting a number of efforts to see if we can't get the Towpath trail completed into downtown. The Trust for Public Land, we've given them some special staffing to work on that. And as I say, they've gotten some money from us and they've just acquired one of the first critical properties, a parking lot in the in the Flats that will become kind of part of the footprint for Canal Basin Park. And from what I understand, there's two or three others that they think they can acquire that are part of the proposed route for the Towpath Trail. So I'm hoping someday we'll be able to do the whole ride from Cleveland to Akron on the completed Towpath Trail. Not quite there yet, but we are starting to see some of the dominoes fall into place. The... One of the interesting challenges was, you know, timing's important in the real estate business, and for a while the ability to purchase anything in the Flats pretty well dried up because of the sense that that was to be where the convention center would be built and the federal courthouse was built there, and there was a sense there'd be a demand for a lot more parking and other kinds of things. And for a variety of reasons, now things have started to open up again. And I say we're really pleased that the first... The first parcel's been acquired. The story is that often it leads to others because it kind of sets a price, right? No one will be the first one to sell because they don't want to sell too low, but if you see what your neighbor gets for your, for their house, you have a better sense of what your house is worth in the real world. So.

**Karen Grindall** [00:37:34] Very true. As a funder, I know that in foundation funding there is often cycles.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:37:39] Mhm.

**Karen Grindall** [00:37:39] A certain time period of year is for one interest area, another one for an interest area. Is this true when you have really large projects such as this, or can those funders come to you during the year and appeal to you at that time if they have a need? Let's say the Towpath land acquisition.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:38:09] Right. Well, we've tried to simplify our world and we've done away with our deadlines so people can approach us any time. And we've made some changes in our review process so that we no longer have to have, you know, a firm... We said when I started we had a firm quarterly deadline, so the end of every quarter was a deadline and then you heard at the end of the next quarter. So if you submitted in March, you'd hear in June if everything went well. We've done away with those deadlines. So we accept proposals at all times and review them as they come in. So I think that's helped both the grantees, or the applicants, because when you have a deadline, you always find out that someone always needs an extra day or two and you either give it to them, in which case it's not a deadline, or you're highly bureaucratic and don't give them the time and you either get a less well-developed proposal or to wait for 90 days. So it's helped our applicants and I think it's helped us kind of spread the workload out 'cause in those old days at the deadline date you could barely see our reception desk for all the piles of proposals coming in. So we've been able to kind of more evenly spread out the work and perhaps handle a little bit better internally to the foundation as well.

**Karen Grindall** [00:39:35] Also in the old days—and I think it's changed, and I'd like for you to help us understand this—it was not politically correct to appeal to one funder and another funder, but it sounds like there's more collaboration today?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:39:52] I think it's true and, you know, as I travel around the country, I think there's more collaboration in Northeast Ohio than there is in some other parts of the country. Some places you go and they said, well, we never talk to that funder. They do X and we do Y, and we've kind of divided up the world that way, which always strikes me as pretty strange because I'm sure I get an email or a phone call from another funder almost every day. And we do a lot of joint review of proposals in this region. We now have 80 foundations working on regional economic development and working together on that. We have a half dozen funders who work in healthcare who jointly share a lot of proposals. So I think there's a lot more collaboration in this region in particular, and, but also a sensitivity that we don't so much collaborate, that there, that there still needs to be a place for someone who doesn't exactly fit. And, you know, one of the dangers is you kind of get groupthink and, you know, I think one of the one of the attractive things about the foundation community is that it... One of the challenging things about the foundation community is its diversity. And one of the attractive things is the diversity. You know, when I talk about foundations, I say it's not like the McDonald's franchise where they're all pretty much the same. It's more like when you're traveling and you get to a hotel room and you pull out the phone book and you look up a restaurant and you've got, you know, big chain restaurants, you've got small mom and pop restaurants, you've got an northern Italian restaurant and a Greek restaurant. And what's attractive about that is you can find a restaurant that meets your needs. But if you're new in a town, it can be really frustrating to try to figure out which ones are good and how you get to them and all that. The foundation world is kind of that way sometimes. It's good in that there's often, if you have a quirky idea then maybe there's a foundation that's just perfect for your idea. But it's also... The diversity makes it hard sometimes for applicants to know who to approach and how to approach them.

**Karen Grindall** [00:42:11] So in a sense, are you protectors of the region?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:42:19] That's a great question. I don't know. [crosstalk] I think to some degree we are. What we hear from our board members when they retire—we have a ten-year limit on our board members—is a couple of things. One of which is a sense that it's been a great partnership between board and staff. But we also hear that it's one of the few places they can go where they feel that the institution is less looking out for its interests and more looking out for the community's interest or the broader interest. Now, that helps us. I mean, it helps when you sit on a couple billion dollars of assets to be able to do that where we don't have to raise our operating expense every year. And you can perhaps take a little bit of a longer term view. Certainly when it comes to something like the park, we were able to take a longer term view than some of the politicians who have two-year time horizons, or six-year for senators but two years for others. And I think it would look a little bit more at, you know, we like to say we take the long-term view, that we keep the community's needs in mind as opposed to any one institution's needs in mind, and that's not to denigrate any important institution. But, you know, if you're the president of Case, your first focus is to keep Case in mind. And then within that, you obviously want to be supportive. Obviously, we have to care about the Cleveland Foundation and the legalities and the advocacy and the other things we've talked about. But at its core, as I was talking about our mission, it's less focused on us. I mean, our mission is less about us being a bigger foundation or whatever and more about the region. So.

**Karen Grindall** [00:44:22] The Cuyahoga Valley National Park project goes through so many communities.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:44:29] Right.

**Karen Grindall** [00:44:29] Do you think they could have accomplished this without having a foundation that also umbrellas so many regions?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:44:40] Well, it would have been harder. It's always hard to know whether we could have or couldn't have. I think there was... There was kind of a power early on to the Peninsula Association to get a relatively modest grant from a foundation that kind of kept people at the table to kind of give them a sense of well maybe we're onto something. And then at very critical times over the years, having the foundations behind the park was important. I think it was important when questions were asked about was this really desired in the region. When you were creating the park, that people said, well, gee, the big foundations are standing behind this. They're supportive. I'm sure it was valuable. And the neighbors were complaining on Oak Hill Road that that was the worst thing to ever happened, to say well, gee, the Cleveland Foundation has supported this and hasn't backed away despite the neighbors. As I say, I remember some of those discussions with board members calling me up and saying, what are these letters we're getting? And, you know, are we as bad as they say we are? And I'd say no, you know, there's, this is noise in the system, but you've got to keep your eye on kind of the bigger prize here. And I'm sure that, I know that, you know, some of the early foundation support for the Environmental Education Center, where there were relatively few funders who stepped up, then when they kind of did the November Lodge and there were more who stepped up because now you had a proven entity and then you can start to grow. So I hate to say we were, it wouldn't have happened without us, but I think it made it more likely it would have succeeded to have had funders behind it. And some of it's the money and some of it's kind of the reputational sense of some of the funders that that make a project more real. So.

**Karen Grindall** [00:46:48] So underneath the foundation, do you have an umbrella of other smaller grantees that you manage and then you put it into the categories such as they had a family that left an inheritance and they want, you know, maybe to disperse it?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:47:10] Yeah.

**Karen Grindall** [00:47:12] I mean, small guys.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:47:12] Sure we do. That's part of the role of a community foundation is allowing everyone to be a philanthropist, that you don't have to be a Rockefeller or a Gates or a Ford. And we, you know, we have thousands... Our finance department just goes crazy sometimes managing thousands of individual ledger accounts for all these funds. And people leave us money unrestricted where we can do what we see best with it through various types of restrictions from fairly broad, the needs of children or the needs of the aging or the arts, to very narrow. Supporting breast cancer research by a woman physician is a fund we have at the foundation. So and we do a matching of opportunities and dollars and that's part of kind of what happens behind the scenes at the foundation is doing, is managing all those individual accounts. Now, a community foundation does have in its governing instrument that we can change the purpose of money over... That's one of the core ideas of a community foundation is that it's very hard to predict the charitable needs of the future. And, you know, we have money at the foundation that was left to us for sending children with polio and smallpox or whatever to fresh air camps. And you know that that needs no longer important but the needs of children with chronic disabilities may be and a community foundation... By giving to a community foundation, you accept the idea that they can change the purpose over time without having to go through the whole process of probate court and all that. So we have built into our instrument what we call the variance power, and we don't use it a lot but our founder, who brought some very strong beliefs to the table, one of which was that everyone could be a philanthropist. He actually believed everyone should be a philanthropist, that you should care for your immediate family and then you should care for those charities that really cared that you cared about, and then you should give something to the future. And he also believes strongly in that a community foundation board should not be dominated by the interests of donors, but by the community. So the majority of our board is appointed through various public processes. And then his final point was that he believed in... He talked a lot about the dead hand of charity and in ways that people tried to anticipate the needs of the future and then created more problems than they had. In fact, his daughter once said they were scared to go upstairs in the house because they were afraid the dead hand of charity was like a hand that would grab them. And he used to use these examples of someone in England who left money that should support the poorest person in town. And then over time, all the poor people would move into town in order to qualify. Well, that wasn't what the person had in mind. Or other things, like I say, diseases that were cured and, you know, who knows what in 100 years will be the needs of Cleveland? And so that's part of the community foundation model. But when we can, we certainly carry our stewardship role forward.

**Karen Grindall** [00:50:54] [inaudible] Is there anything else that you would like to tell us that I haven't inquired about?

**Robert Eckardt** [00:51:00] No, I think we've covered most of it. I guess I would just say that I would say that when we started in the Cuyahoga Valley work, it was one of our first steps out of Cuyahoga County. We you know, we are the Cleveland Foundation. And Cleveland became a little bit more like Cuyahoga County in our thinking, and we hadn't done a lot there. And so kind of making the case to our board. And I have to acknowledge our board both for their willingness to take the risk early on to kind of see the vision early on, to stand up to the negative letters they got and to stick at it for a period of time. To me that it was really encouraging that we that our board would do that and would see that. And I think it helped kind of to build the case now, as we're working in regional economic development that, you know, the world's less organized around Cleveland and Akron and more organized around regions and how they work together. And, you know, maybe we should bemoan the fact that Cleveland isn't as important as it was in the past. But the reality is the world is a more complex place. And I think the work in the Valley has been good for us in showing our board how you can think regionally.

**Karen Grindall** [00:52:36] Steve, do you have anything you'd like to ask?

**Steve Testa** [00:52:42] The only thing that was coming to my mind that you were talking was I was a little curious. I don't think most kids go, I want to run a foundation and... [Robert laughs] I just wondered if you would comment about either coming to the position of doing that, when you decided this was going to be a career move, and... You know...

**Robert Eckardt** [00:53:02] Sure.

**Steve Testa** [00:53:02] How you feel about doing it right now as the head of the foundation.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:53:07] I'm not quite the head. I'm vice president for programs.

**Steve Testa** [00:53:09] Okay!

**Robert Eckardt** [00:53:09] So there's actually one person above me. But, you know, I never thought about running a foundation either. I came to Cleveland on a project the foundation had funded. So I was finished my Masters was looking for a job. I thought I had a job, didn't quite turn out because it was in state government and they had to go through all the civil service hoops and they couldn't really offer me a job, but they could offer me a short term consulting job. And it was okay for a while, but I needed a job. And so I got recruited to Cleveland and came down on what I thought would be a relatively short term project, two to three years. It then led to a federal grant. So I stayed in Cleveland for another year or two to work on that. And after five years I was thinking I was leaving Cleveland was actually being recruited pretty heavily out of Cleveland and got a call one day and was asked if I'd have lunch with the director of the Cleveland Foundation. And I asked his secretary if I could ask what it was about, and she said no, but it would be worthwhile for you to go to this lunch. [laughs] So I went, had lunch with him, and he asked me all these questions about how did I think the foundation was doing in health work and were we funding the right things and were there are things—not we in those days—were they funding the right things, were there things the foundation could do better? And it's pretty unscary to be interviewed when you're not applying for a job. So I just told them what I thought. And at the end of lunch he said, I'd like you to come over and do the health work for the foundation. So I... He said, but I have to check with our associate director, who had been my program officer so I figured if he didn't think I should do it, I shouldn't do it, right? He knew me better than the director and he was enthusiastic so... I went there and that was 1982, so twenty-six years ago almost, and again thought I'd be there for a relatively short period of time. And it feels like it's been kind of five different jobs because I did health and then they added environment and then they added evaluation, kind of looking at the impact of our grant and then I became vice president. So it's been kind of an enough change and evolution over time. And the foundation's changed and evolved over time that it's continued to be an interesting place to work. And I think that, you know, foundations have... Certain people work well in that setting and certain ones don't. You have to be flexible, willing to work on a lot of different things. You have to recognize that you're the funder, not the project manager, and you will work hard to get some stuff funded that won't quite turn out the way you wanted it. And you can't run all your grantees. You can try to be helpful, but ultimately they have to do the work. You know, we'll make four hundred and some grants a year. And so you're working with lots... You have the excitement of working with lots of people, but you don't have a particular program that you can go home and say, I did this. You know, from its initial start, I made all the decisions. I implemented it. It's kind of mine. And some people come to the foundation after a while, say that's more what they want to do. So they're interested in education, they want to get back into the classroom and see kids and do that as opposed to do grants at the system level. I've found enough to keep me interested and have really been kind of interested in this whole concept of how foundations really make a difference. So but still, it's kind of surprising to me that it's been twenty-six years and I'm still working here today. I never had that in my mind. And most of the people we hire don't. There are now some programs that, I think Indiana University and others, that are designed to train people for a foundation work. But most people we hire come out of our nonprofit, their grantees who've done good work and now want to step up to kind of the broader, you know, beyond a single agency and see if they can make a difference in a different kind of way.

**Karen Grindall** [00:57:43] We really sincerely appreciate you sharing with us this interview.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:57:49] Oh, good. Glad I could do it.

**Karen Grindall** [00:57:57] And giving us your input and your thoughts, especially concerning Cuyahoga Valley Environmental Ed in Cuyahoga Valley National Park.

**Robert Eckardt** [00:57:57] I'm glad I could do it, so thanks.