

# Carmen Rojas Wants to Create a Future Where Foundations Don't Need to Exist

Ade Adeniji | February 25, 2021



MARGUERITE CASEY FOUNDATION PRESIDENT & CEO CARMEN ROJAS

Last I covered the [Marguerite Casey Foundation \(MCF\)](#), it was still being steered by the founding President and CEO Luz Vega-Marquis. MCF has been a key player in the progressive foundation world for a while now, embracing ideas like inclusive grantmaking, intersectionality, general support and bottom-up movement-building.

One example of the foundation's forward-thinking approach was the establishment of Equal Voice Networks in regions across the United States to identify shared concerns and coordinate advocacy strategies. Rather than operating in silos, it encouraged organizations to work together and build collective power. While she drew criticism for her [management practices](#) at times, Vega-Marquis spent some two decades spearheading a pioneering charity where 60% of the staff and 82% of the board are people of color. And when she retired in mid-2020, she facilitated the first Latina-to-Latina leadership transition at a national foundation.

A Berkeley Ph.D. and Fulbright scholar, MCF's new President and CEO Carmen Rojas brings a long

background in philanthropy and working for intermediaries. Back in 2014 in Oakland, she launched the Workers Lab to invest in ideas, projects and organizing models supporting the next-generation worker movement. Rojas was excited to step into the role at MCF because she and the foundation aligned in many ways.

"Multiyear general operating support should be the norm. Foundations should be the accelerant for the leaders in our community, so that they have the power to shape our democracy and our economy," explained Rojas in a recent interview.

But what's changed or changing at the Seattle-based foundation? How does Rojas plan on steering it? And what particular strategies is the foundation undertaking on the heels of a year that no one will forget?

## Doubling down

Since 2002, Marguerite Casey Foundation has invested its resources to support and sustain movements for social and economic justice. In the wake of the killing of George Floyd and a new push for racial justice, along with the January 6 insurrection, MCF is doubling down on supporting leaders across the country. In 2020, MCF gave \$26.5 million in core grantmaking dollars, 96% of which comprises general support grants, and 82% of which went to organizations run by BIPOC leaders.

MCF historically operated more than a dozen Equal Voice Networks in the 13 states where the foundation works. Now, the foundation is winding down these networks and going national, a decision that Rojas doesn't take lightly. She wants to dole out grants to places where their resources can be truly catalytic.

In refining their approach, Rojas and Jonathan Jayes-Green, MCF's new vice president of programming, engaged in conversation, conducted surveys, and spent a long time meeting with grant recipients. Jayes-Green gained prominence as the former national Latinx outreach director for Sen. Elizabeth Warren's presidential campaign. Ultimately, they concluded that while Equal Voices brought people together, the mandate could be a barrier for some organizations.

"Instead, we're allowing leaders to tell us how, where and when they would like to collaborate, and how we can help with that process. But this truly needs to come at their discretion," Rojas told me.

The foundation is still doing vital work at the U.S./Mexico border in West Texas. From its founding through the summer of 2019, MCF had made over \$100 million in grants to organizations working on immigration reform at the border. Today, the foundation is doubling down its commitment in the South more broadly and looking for ways to support organizing, specifically in service of economic expansion.

In the midst of election season, MCF also stepped up with a \$200,000 grant to the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition (FRRC) to protect the voting rights of returning citizens and help end disenfranchisement of all people who



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have been formerly incarcerated. MCF was one of the early funders of this grassroots organization, which is run by returning citizens.

## Funding academics seeking change

Last September, MCF and Group Health Foundation announced the \$3 million Freedom Scholars Initiative, supporting progressive academics who are at the forefront of movements for economic and social justice, and creating catalytic ideas for transformative change. The 12-member cohort includes Megan Ming Francis, associate professor of political science at the University of Washington, Ruha Benjamin, associate professor of African American studies at Princeton University, and Dylan Rodríguez, author of the upcoming book “White Reconstruction: Domestic Warfare and the Logic of Racial Genocide.”

Freedom Scholars Initiative is in line with the foundation’s longstanding commitment to supporting progressive Black, brown and immigrant leaders. Too often, Rojas laments, these leaders have to wait for resources to do their work. MCF’s work here also has policy and advocacy implications. As we’ve covered at length, philanthropic dollars have been pouring into college campuses and universities for years now, sometimes with a partisan bent.

Still, there isn’t really an equivalence here, Rojas says. “There are so many ways academic scholarship on the right has been heavily and disproportionately influenced by right-wing funders who’ve supported academics. Progressives need funds to do the callout and also work in alignment with supporters and activists on the ground. This is the kind of cross-sector weaving we know is necessary.”

## “Dismantling the norms of philanthropy”

In the midst of a galvanized movement for Black lives, leaders including those in philanthropy have made high-minded statements about the importance of equality and change. But Rojas thinks several things are missing from these discussions. While it’s one thing for institutional philanthropy to start to fund white leaders and overwhelmingly white organizations to get on board and do racial justice work, she believes there are better options. Indeed, actually empowering leaders of color to do this work instead.

For this reason, in her first few months, Rojas has set her sights on “dismantling the norms of philanthropy” that make it difficult for the grassroots organizations they back to do their important work. She’s spent a lot of time simply questioning conventional institutional wisdom. Rather than talking to heads of organizations for six hours, for instance, it might be useful for foundations to just believe what nonprofits say. And she’s not too keen on the technocratic ways that foundations “surveil” organizations, either, as she describes it. She’d much rather just put actual power into the hands of POC leaders and communities.

In a time of obvious political divide and partisanship, Rojas is doubling down on [her foundation’s progressive mission](#). “Too often in philanthropy, we say in order to be nonpartisan, we can’t be ideological so we concede a whole bunch of terrain. And yet our opponents on the right do not have that concern and are actively working from 501(c) dollars, including who and how that January 6 coup was funded... So we need to step out of the edges and into the core of the fight of our democracy,” Rojas says.

But perhaps the most striking thing Rojas said in our conversation is that funders need to do the work of creating a future where they no longer need to exist. She admits that this might be strange for a new president of a foundation to say, but she’s hitting the ground running in her new role at MCF and not mincing words: “I don’t want to spend time in the convincing, I want to spend time in the imagining and creating.”

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