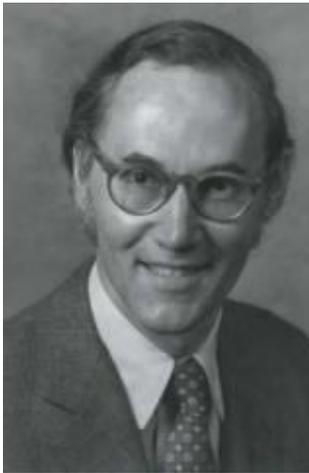


Profile of Robert W. Scrivner



Robert W. Scrivner built his own cabin by hand, but the brilliant Harvard University trained attorney is most remembered for building one of the most progressive charitable foundations in the United States: the Rockefeller Family Fund.

Born September 11, 1935 in Topeka, Kansas, Scrivner was one of two sons of George and Catherine (Winston) Scrivner. Robert Scrivner grew up in a middle class family and attended public schools. In high school, he played on the basketball team and contributed to the student newspaper. His brother Noel recalls that as a member of the high school debate team Bob always chose to argue an issue on the affirmative side which was characteristic of his positive approach to life. His experience as a participant in Boy's State, a national parliamentarian club for youth, was his first opportunity to be involved in the political process. While there he ran for the office of governor and was narrowly defeated. Although he was disappointed at the loss, it did not discourage him from continuing to take risks.

Scrivner received a scholarship to attend Harvard University, which he supplemented by summer work building houses in Kansas and roads in Alaska. He majored in philosophy. At even this early age, the thoughtful, intense young man was exploring how he could make the most difference to society during a lifetime.

He set his sights on becoming an ordained minister but his father, an engineer with Bell Telephone, urged him toward a career as an attorney. A difficult relationship with his father, along with a heart murmur that prevented him from continuing in a sport he loved, basketball, were factors that taught him to rise above disappointment and chart his own course. After graduation, Scrivner spent a year on a Lionel de Jersey Fellowship as the Harvard Scholar at Cambridge University in England, studying law. He returned to the United States and Harvard Law School, where he earned a law degree in 1961. While studying at Harvard, Scrivner had a life shaping and changing experience as a student in the Defense Policy Seminar taught by Henry Kissinger. (Kissinger later served as U.S. Secretary of State in the Nixon and Ford Administrations and in 1973 was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.) The seminar provided a new perspective and a sense of urgency to Scrivner's concern over international conflicts and the specter of nuclear war and fueled his aspirations to one day become Secretary of State.



In 1961, Scrivner met and soon married Melinda Brown, born in Montreal, Canada, who graduated from Wellesley College and later taught school. The Scrivners would have one daughter, Katherine.

Melinda Scrivner recalled that after completing law school, her husband “wanted to move to Pittsburgh ‘to save the labor unions.’ He found out the unions didn’t need rescuing at that point in time,” she said with a chuckle. He was employed by a law firm, but didn’t like working in corporate law because he didn’t believe it gave him the opportunity to make a difference for the common good. His “huge social conscience, his ambition and drive to make a difference” moved him in other life directions.

In 1963, at age 28, Scrivner was offered a position with the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, a major foundation that continued the philanthropic legacy of John D. Rockefeller.

In 1967, Martha, John, Laurance, Nelson and David Rockefeller (John D. Rockefeller’s grandchildren) incorporated another foundation, the Rockefeller Family Fund (RFF), as a vehicle for the philanthropy of a still younger (fourth) generation of Rockefellers. Scrivner was named its executive director. It is significant that during his tenure as President of the Fund, he was in the same age bracket (32-48 years) as most of its board members. In 1978, the first member of the fifth generation was elected to the board, and by 2000 over half the board was comprised of fifth generation members.

Scrivner both helped the family fine-tune their own charitable interests and stretched them to consider creative, risk-taking grants not typically popular with politicians, the news media or even the general public. As one Rockefeller family member would later observe, “He (Bob) served not us, but our common ideals.” He was able to do this because of his impeccable even-handedness and the force of his strongly held personal beliefs, which he expressed with economy and grace.

Dr. Richard Chasin, a colleague and later director of the Family Fund, said: “His graciousness was a matter of fact. He was very friendly in a quiet, respectful way. He treated people as if they were very intelligent and well-motivated. With Bob, you got equal respect, whether you were John D. Rockefeller III or the youngest person in the family.” Others described Scrivner as someone who combined reasoned thought with intuition. He worked “out of his soul, heart, gut and intellect.”

He was concerned about big issues in society and how the Rockefeller Family Fund could most benefit society. Scrivner was good at asking questions. If there was a difficult decision, he wanted the facts, but he also wanted to probe the heart of the issue.



Of all of Scrivner's efforts to better the human condition through the Rockefeller Family Fund, his work in nuclear arms control was the most important to him and perhaps proved to be the most important for society. Scrivner saw nuclear war as the single most urgent issue of the day, and he, arguably more than anyone else in foundation philanthropy, was the catalyst that led to the great arms control movement of the past 25 years. He worked with the Rockefeller Family Fund board to launch public interest advocacy and public awareness initiatives that exposed the potential biological impact of nuclear war and the inevitable "nuclear winter" that would destroy most life on the planet.

Dr. Chasin said Scrivner had a key role in supporting individual groups involved in the movement for the prevention of nuclear war. He was one of the earliest supporters of the International Physicians for Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), a group that would later receive the Noble Peace Prize. He was instrumental in Dr. Chasin's involvement with the group. Scrivner knew that the IPPNW was holding its second meeting at Cambridge University and suggested that Chasin attend.

"I said to Bob: 'Why should I go to this? Is it just because I'm a doctor?' Chasin recalled. "Bob replied: 'No, because it will change your life.' I went. And it did change my life."

Chasin described Scrivner as a seeker of information, truth, and productive social change. Although he was over 6 foot in height, handsome, and "Clark Kent-like in appearance (concealing the moral superhero within)", Scrivner seemed to "occupy only the volume of space in which he stood. His gestures were spare. His words were not wasted. He thought before he decided and he decided before he spoke." People marveled at his listening skills. A colleague, Robert Allen said that "He combined the savvy of a police reporter, the background of a scholar and his own easy, unthreatening grace, he worked unerringly" to stake out venturesome new ground for the Family Fund.

At the Rockefeller Family Fund, Scrivner worked with the Board to establish a grant making program in institutional responsiveness. He advocated "telling truth to power" and supported efforts that urged social and political leaders, and their institutions to face reality and acknowledge the consequences of their actions on all citizens and on the future of society. He wanted to help ensure that large institutions remained responsible and responsive to everyday citizens and communities.

Chasin said Scrivner believed in the "troublemaker school" of social and political change. As a lawyer, he knew that for almost every good cause there are likely to be relevant laws on the books that are not being enforced. He encouraged the Rockefeller Family Fund to support class action lawsuits. The Rockefeller Family Fund was among the first foundations to assert



that cigarette smoking was killing millions of Americans and that tobacco companies should be sued.

In 1979, the original class suits about the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam were filed. Scrivner recommended that the Family Fund support Vietnam veterans exposed to the toxic substance dioxin. Few other foundations were willing to take on this controversial issue. The veterans went on to win their cases in court, and were awarded \$180,000,000, the largest amount won by a class of claimants for wrongful injury up to that time.

Under Scrivner's leadership, the Fund also developed a grant making program devoted to protecting the environment, and another program to advance women's rights to economic equality.

Working long hours and days at his foundation job, Scrivner nevertheless believed in a balanced life embracing his family and other interests. Melinda recalled their mutual love of the outdoors, his passion for chopping wood and making trails, and times spent together with friends at the small family cabin near Woodstock, NY. He said he loved to chop wood because the results were immediately measurable, unlike foundation work where the effects were not so instantly apparent.

One friend said, "Bob's idea of fun and relaxation was hard physical labor. He built his...cabin without benefit of electricity, using only hand tools. Each board he cut himself; each nail he pounded...Bob loved the challenge. There was always a project in the works."

Scrivner believed that philanthropic foundations should be continuously challenged to take on the role in society of "nurturing important ideas of the moment." Recognizing that role is the purpose of the *Robert W. Scrivner Award for Creative Grantmaking*. Each year, the Council on Foundations selects individuals from the philanthropic and charitable fields who have mirrored Robert Scrivner's dedication. Melinda Scrivner believes that her husband would have been honored and proud of having this award in his name. She said, "Bob felt that the important thing was to take a risk and go for what you believe in. He thought that even foundations were getting a little too conservative. Risk-taking for what he believed in was what he thought life was all about."

Bob died in 1984 at age 48, succumbing to his own long struggle with cancer. More than 900 friends, colleagues and admirers joined Melinda and Katherine Scrivner in celebrating Bob Scrivner's life at Unitarian Church of All Souls, May 16, 1984 in New York City.

