

NEW YORK OBSERVER

LIVES IN PHILANTHROPY

Monday, October 20, 2008

Circulation: 50,415

Melissa A. Berman

Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors

By **Jillian Blume**

After receiving a Ph.D in English from Stanford University, Melissa Berman, President and CEO of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, realized that the academic life was not for her. That decision turned out to be good fortune for philanthropy on a local, national, and global level. After working for the Federal Reserve Bank, she moved to a non-profit organization called The Conference Board. “It was my first experience with what philanthropy could do,” Ms. Berman said about serving as Senior Vice President, Research and Program Development. The non-profit was founded in 1916 around events that forecast labor unrest and management corruption, such as the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. Today, according to their mission statement, they conduct research and organize conferences in order to help businesses strengthen their performances so they can better serve society.

“I was excited about the opportunities that philanthropy offered to test new models for social change and progress,” Ms. Berman said. She began to get involved with some of the big institutional foundations that The Conference Board was getting funding from. “I became more and more intrigued about philanthropy as a lever for change and started to think about getting more deeply involved with philanthropy.”

Ms. Berman has led New York-based Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors since January 2001, a non-profit with a mission to “help donors create thoughtful, effective philanthropy throughout the world.” They work with donors who support numerous causes, including the arts, education, environment, and economic development. “I’m particularly intrigued by the kind of social change that creates livelihood and assets for people,” she said.

Last year, the non-profit advised on about \$175,000,000 in giving across all the major issue areas and into 30 countries. They also “sponsor or support several focused initiatives aimed at specific areas of need around the world.” Their list of current projects is broad-based. The New York State Music Fund gives individual grants and supports programs that expand public access to music. The Breakthrough Institute is a think tank committed to creating a new progressive politics. The Bridge Fund gives grants to Tibetan communities in China. The Earth Charter Fund works toward spreading its charter of principles for building a “just, sustainable, and peaceful global society for the 21st century.” Ms. Berman also serves as director of City Harvest and the Foundation Center and is an adjunct professor at Columbia University’s School of Business where she teaches philanthropy.

After 9/11, she found a source of personal comfort in being involved in an organization that was trying to help. “Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors did an enormous amount of advising about grant making that helped raise close to \$100,000,000. So I felt like I was in the right place at the right time,” she said. “I’m very fortunate to be in a job where I can help people make philanthropic investments that make the world a better place.”

