GRAHAM C. LOUNT
FAMILY FOUNDATION

From Transaction to Trust

A family foundation's journey

September 2026

Across Winnipeg, organizations have been supporting children, youth and their families for decades. They know their communities in ways that take years to learn. They are run by passionate and generous people who have become part of the very neighbourhoods around them.

For twenty-one years, I have been honoured to lead the Graham C. Lount Family Foundation, a family foundation in Winnipeg. It has supported local social profit organizations for twenty-five years. At the heart of how we work is a desire to shift power toward the organizations we support. In practice, that means we do not set the agenda for our partners, and we do not hold them to goals we have chosen. We help fund their work, and we trust them to lead it. This is not how we have always worked.

The way we used to work

It helps to be honest about where we started. For most of our history, we practised in a traditional and transactional way. An organization sent us a grant application. I prepared a board docket. Our board reviewed it and made a decision. We gave the grant, and we expected a final report by a set date. Every grant was for a single year. Even a partner we funded year after year had to submit a brand-new application each time. They could never count on the year ahead, so they could not plan.

Our applications were long. Some of the questions make me cringe now. We asked how a program would become sustainable. In truth, many never will. These are social profit organizations. They rarely have core funding of their own, so they are always fundraising and applying for the next grant. For years, funders like me kept them on that treadmill. We chased the next shiny new idea, rather than steadily supporting the programs that were already working. We also asked organizations to name the goals they would achieve, which was really asking them to predict the future. They work with people, and people are wonderfully unpredictable.

What we changed

COVID-19 was our turning point, as it was for many funders. Almost overnight, we knew we had to get funds out the door quickly. Our partners were in crisis, and there was no time for long applications or reports. Once we had worked that way, we could not unsee it. We began to ask why we did not always fund like this. And we asked what it would take to do so, how our processes might have to change and with them our notions about accountability.

In some ways, this did not feel like a leap into something new. It felt more like returning to the trust that was already there. We had worked with the same partners in the same community for long enough that trust was already how we operated. The sector language came later. The shift meant a few concrete changes, and none of them happened all at once.

- Multi-year unrestricted funding. This means partners can put resources where they are most needed: core costs, staff, or keeping the lights on, not only new programs.
- The maintenance of ongoing relationship throughout the year. This emphasizes the importance of connecting in person, by phone, and by email, not just at a year-end conversation.
- Letting go of the yearly grant application and the formal written year-end report. This was replaced by ongoing conversations and a yearly "check-in" that emphasized listening, honest feedback, discovery and learning.
- Doing our own homework. We gather what we need ourselves: annual reports, public updates, and the issues arising across the Winnipeg community. Much of this is already out there. Staying informed is our responsibility, not one more task for organizations that are already stretched thin.
- Support beyond the cheque. Through our granting network, we help to facilitate connections between partners, advocacy, and leveraging of additional funding.
- Always listening and taking our lead from the organizations themselves. We do not set the direction. They are the experts, and they do the hard work. We see how hard it is, and we are grateful for it. Our part is to support it with funding, and that is the easy part.

Our questions have changed, too. Instead of asking organizations to predict the future, we ask what they hope to achieve. Afterward, we ask what went well, what was hard, and what they learned. We make it clear that plans often go sideways, and that this is not a failure. We tend to learn the most from the outcomes we did not expect. Our partners know we will still be there. If a program needs to pivot or change direction, we will help where we can.

Today it feels less like funding and more like walking alongside our partners. We continue to learn from them and to reflect on our own practice, and we know we still have work to do.

When the unexpected happens

Some of the support that matters most to our partners is the kind that is hard to find anywhere else. Many funders will only give within set categories, or attach specific conditions to a grant. We try to be there for the needs that fall outside those lines. When a partner faces an urgent or unusual need, we are able to move quickly. Our board can approve an emergency grant without a long process or a long wait. A few examples:

- Unexpected operating costs that many funders will not cover: staffing, professional development, rent, and the basics of keeping an organization running.
- Helping replace or repair vehicles that were integral to running the programming at two organizations.
- A burst pipe that damaged a kitchen. Our grant covered the repair and spared the organization an insurance claim, which would have raised its premiums for years to come.
- Basic supplies for families displaced by wildfires: strollers, playpens, and activity kits.
- A last-minute funding shortfall that would otherwise have meant a program could not run.

We encourage our partners to reach out whenever something like this arises. The trust here is mutual. They know they will not be judged for asking, and that we will take their need seriously. This is what we mean by partnership.

What our partners tell us

I do not need to name anyone to say this honestly. Across our partnerships I hear the same benefits again and again, from different organizations. These are the themes that come up most.

- **Flexibility to respond and pivot.** The funding is unrestricted, so partners can move quickly when circumstances change. They do not have to wait for permission when a crisis or a sudden gap arises.
- **The value of committed, long-term funding.** Because our funding is secure for years at a time, partners spend less time seeking new grants. A steady commitment also shows other funders a history of being backed, which helps them attract further support.

- **Being heard and having the work understood.** Partners often feel judged and stretched. Many feel under constant pressure to prove themselves. It makes a real difference when someone truly listens. It helps to have someone acknowledge that the work is genuinely hard, and to know that we value their efforts. That kind of understanding is a small thing that means a great deal.
- **Conversations instead of reports.** Letting go of formal reporting frees partners to spend more of their time on the people they serve. It also changes what we learn. A conversation in person or by video opens up the human side of an organization. We hear about its real challenges and its successes. We see the health of the whole organization, not just the one program we happen to fund. We hear the stories and we meet the people doing the work. We can ask questions in the moment. In its own way, that builds more accountability than a paper report, not less.
- **Stability for staffing and planning.** When funding is secured over several years, organizations can plan ahead with far more confidence. It also helps them keep good people. A staff member can be told their position is funded next year, rather than left waiting to hear whether the money will come. Without that certainty, staff who are a good fit often have to look elsewhere for work. Keeping staff also spares an organization the cost and disruption of constantly training someone new.
- **Trust that runs both ways.** The organizations we fund live the work every day. They know what their communities need and where the money should go far better than we ever could. When we trust that expertise and let partners direct the funding, we show that we believe in their judgment.

What twenty-five years builds

Rather than always adding new partners and spreading ourselves thin, we have chosen to go deeper. We stay with the organizations we already know, and we stay long enough for relationships to mature. Over the years that has let us increase what we give to our roughly forty partners. It has also let us respond when an emergency, a special project, or a new pilot arises.

It has also produced something we did not design. Our partners have found one another. They run programs together. Their staff move between organizations over their careers, and carry what they have learned from one to the next. They compare notes on what is actually working with the young people in front of them. Winnipeg's social profit sector is small, so some of this would have happened regardless. But long-term stable funding and the resulting trusting relationships changes what is possible. When organizations are not competing for the same grant, collaboration becomes natural. We have been able to introduce partners who might not otherwise have met. That includes connecting Winnipeg organizations with remote northern Manitoba communities.

> *The foundation is more like the soil than the gardener. Soil does not take credit for the garden. It just makes the garden possible.*

I have come to believe the practices are only the surface. Shaady Salehi of the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project describes them as the visible tip of an iceberg. Beneath them sit our culture, our values, and our beliefs about power. That is the deeper and harder work, and it is never quite finished. There is no moment when a funder becomes trust-based enough. It is an ongoing practice. We keep returning to the same honest questions: where are we still holding onto power, and where do our own systems quietly work against our values?

None of this means writing a cheque and walking away. It does ask more of us as funders. But I have found it far more rewarding. The reward is in the relationships. It is getting to know the real impact of the funding, and the people behind the work. I feel grateful to know the generous, passionate, and dedicated people in the social profit sector. They are not in it for the money or the accolades. The sector is notoriously underpaid, and recognition is rare. They do it because they care.

If you are a funder just beginning, you do not need to change everything at once. You can start with a single organization you already know well and a single practice.

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