An Affinity for Service: John Loewy and Polly Ehrenhaft

When John Loewy and Polly Ehrenhaft met in Washington in 1981, both were working in the public service sector. An attorney, John served as Counsel to the U.S. House Committee on Science and Technology, while Polly worked for the Office of Technology Assessment, a Congressional research organization. Thirty-four years later, the couple share two children, a philosophy of engaged philanthropy, and a history of giving through The Denver Foundation’s donor-advised funds.

“We view our philanthropic activities through The Denver Foundation as a continuation of our careers and professional vocations,” says John. “It’s a way to continue to be engaged in the issues that we’re passionate about, with people who are working in the field doing innovative and effective projects.

“It’s one thing to write a check and feel good about it, and then that’s it,” adds John. “I’m much more interested in being involved with the people who are doing the work.”

As a public health professional and a volunteer, Polly has served a number of children’s health and education organizations; she currently sits on the board of the Denver Film Society and chairs its education committee. A former Chair of the Colorado Air Quality Control Commission, John is focused on environmental sustainability. He serves on the boards of directors of both Western Resource Advocates and Conservation Colorado. In 2014, he co-founded The Denver Foundation’s Environmental Affinity Group, a collective giving platform.

“The Environmental Affinity Group creates an exciting opportunity to bring in people who maybe have been interested in environmental and conservation issues but maybe haven’t had an outlet,” says John. “We’re beginning to engage a broader community and to educate ourselves around these issues as a group. It’s a way to leverage financial contributions with personal involvement and expertise.”

Personal involvement and service are values that extend to the couple’s two children. Katrina, 29, holds a master’s degree in conservation biology and works with the Denver-based animal advocacy crowdfunding site, loveanimals.org. After finishing his first year of law school at Washington University in St. Louis, Dan, 26, will spend the summer working in the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Denver.

“Polly and I both come from families where giving to the community was very important,” John says. “We’re pleased that our children are following in a similar direction.”

Family Philanthropy Tips

Philanthropy is more than joining a “done-in-a-day” project or writing a year-end check. It means “love of humanity” and it informs the way we show up in the world. Here are ideas to help you plan and analyze your family philanthropy activities all year long.

Ask yourself what you want to accomplish through your family’s engagement.
You may have many answers, including (but not limited to) connection, education, engagement, or impact. Once you know what you’re interested in, pose the same question to your family. Honor both the different responses, and the similar ones.

Discuss the many gifts you have to share through your philanthropy.
Whether it’s “wealth, work, and wisdom,” or “time, talent, and treasure,” you and your family will have many ways to support the work that aligns with your values and goals. Skill-based approaches might help as much as financial contributions. For example, when one organization told a donor family about its need for information technology (IT) assistance, the family offered their IT expertise as pro bono consulting work. Sharing this time and skill saved the organization money and addressed its pressing technology need.

Make a plan of action.
Your plan can be as simple as committing to a regular volunteer job, or as long-term as setting financial and volunteer goals to meet a specific need or priority. Adding the discipline of giving and volunteering to your life will help make philanthropy part of your family’s regular life and thus part of your “DNA.”

Remember to involve others.
“Testimony” is the fourth “T” when discussing sharing your various gifts. It calls us to tell others about the work we’re doing, and to invite them to participate. Ask your friends to help with a community project, and encourage your children to do the same. Research shows that people in Metro Denver believe that we can make a difference in local homelessness, but that they don’t know what to do. Perhaps you can invite someone to make a difference with you!

For ideas or assistance with your family’s charitable activities, call The Denver Foundation’s Philanthropic Services Group at 303.300.1790.