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25 Years of Giving: 7 Questions for David Bohnett on His Philanthropy Anniversary

Wendy Paris | November 17, 2025



David Bohnett has been funding social justice for 25 years. The founder and chairman of the [David Bohnett Foundation](#), devoted to improving society through social activism, has given away more than \$135 million of the foundation’s money and his own to organizations focusing on a handful of areas, including LGBTQ equality, the city of Los Angeles, the arts, technology access, gun violence prevention, animal welfare, and research and leadership development programs.

Bohnett has an interesting backstory that has informed his giving and continues to drive it, including being “a rare, openly gay MBA student at the University of Michigan” during the 1980s, as IP founder [David Callahan wrote](#) in 2014. Bohnett became an activist in grad school and manned a “gay crisis hotline,” where he talked to students about how to come out,” Callahan wrote. Bohnett also volunteered to appear before freshman psychology classes to dispel ignorance and negative ideas about gay people. He would stand before the students, looking like the perfectly normal Midwesterner that he was, and say, ‘I’m gay, ask me anything.’”

After college, Bohnett upped his LGBTQ activism in L.A., including with his then-partner, the activist and openly gay judge Rand



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DAVID BOHNETT. CREDIT: DAVID BOHNETT FOUNDATION

Schrader. When Schrader died of AIDS-related complications in 1993, Bohnett was not entitled to his assets (beyond his life insurance policy) or his judicial pension, despite their 10-year relationship. And instead of inheriting the house they'd lived in, he was walloped with a hefty tax bill. Bohnett moved to a one-bedroom apartment, quit his job to take some time to think, and then threw himself into

creating a community site on the then-still-new internet. He went on to codevelop one of the first-ever social networking and web hosting companies, [GeoCities](#), in 1994. GeoCities was the first large internet venture built on user-generated content, and it allowed users to connect through interests.

GeoCities went public in 1998. Yahoo bought it in 1999 for \$3.57 billion and Bohnett wound up with nearly \$300 million. He turned almost immediately to the job of giving back, creating the David Bohnett Foundation with an initial endowment of \$32 million. He hired Michael Fleming, then at the American Civil Liberties Union, to be the executive director. Today, Fleming is the foundation's president and Paul Moore is the executive director.



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The new foundation funded a number of organizations out of the gate, including GLAAD and Human Rights Campaign. Bohnett soon fixed his sights on marriage equality as a philanthropic goal, becoming part of a core group of funders who absolutely transformed support for and conversation about LGBTQ realities. By 2010, Bohnett's foundation had supported LGBTQ centers "in nearly every corner of the country," according to Callahan's book "Fortunes of Change: The Rise of the Liberal Rich and the Remaking of America." "It's hard to think of any social movement of the past quarter-century that has triumphed as decisively as the LGBTQ movement. It's also hard to think of any movement in which philanthropy has played such a decisive role in accelerating changes in culture and policy," Callahan wrote.

The [David Bohnett Foundation's 25 Year Report](#) highlights the foundation's focus on relationship-building as a strategy for building change: "This report reflects a belief in people as the path to progress — built through trust, consistency, and a long-term commitment to improving society through social activism."

As Bohnett himself wrote in the report: "Had I known more about the philanthropic norms or obstacles that lay ahead, we might not have ended up with a foundation as unique and ambitious as the one we are celebrating today. So much so, our impact has earned us a spot on *Time* magazine's inaugural 2025 TIME 100 Philanthropy list of the 100 most influential leaders in philanthropy."

IP caught up with Bohnett to hear what he's working on now in philanthropy and how he feels about his giving after all these years.

We've been tracking your philanthropy for a while, including in a piece called "[What Does It Feel Like To Win? This Top LGBTQ Funder Tells Us](#)," about the transformative impact of LGBTQ+ giving, and your role in that. Is there an area now that you think you could "win" at through philanthropy, or where philanthropy in general could create real change?

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I'm vice-chair of the board of trustees at USC and very involved with all the challenges facing higher education. The question of "What could be won?" is a broad framework at universities right now. It's almost more like "winning back" — how do we win this opportunity for universities to reengage with truly balanced perspectives? There's a challenge with dialogue of true diversity of viewpoints. That expands to the broader society: What can be won in the broader society?

I appreciate that question because it relates to the battle of same-sex equality. Let's apply that to what's going on now in terms of the need for people to take a broader perspective. Thinking about it in relation to the LGBTQ+ movement, it would be a changing of hearts and minds to an idea that we can all sort of get along. The world did not end with same-sex marriage, as a matter of fact. We're all sort of getting along, and better than we used to, from an LGBTQ+ viewpoint. To use the example of that movement, the battle today is for the world to come around and accept one another.

Interesting to consider LGBTQ+ acceptance next to the intolerance so many Americans have now for other Americans with different political beliefs. How real do you think division and polarization is, as opposed to our perception of it being exaggerated by the media and social media?

I certainly think that social media platforms have created echo chambers for everybody. There's no doubt about that. That's real. It's like the idea that "same-sex marriage will take something away from *me*." That didn't happen. Today, if one side or the other gives ground, it's not a zero-sum game. The extremes are always going to get the attention. The middle is so much bigger than the extremes.

The most important thing that happened in the same-sex equation was coming out. The more we can come out to say, "I'm here to listen, I'm here to understand," that's another form of coming out.

That idea of the extremes sucking up all the airtime reminds me of a piece I recently wrote about the notion of "collective illusions," a

term Todd Rose described in his book by the same name. It's the idea that people misread what the majority of people think and silence their own opinion to fit in with what they mistakenly believe is the dominant view.

You can often crack that dynamic by talking about your own beliefs. It's part of that self-disclosure, which relates to the notion of coming out. We're afraid to speak out right now even about, frankly, that there is stuff that Trump does that I agree with. I'm not afraid to say that there is stuff they're doing that needs to be done. That's sort of hard to say in some cases.

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What role do you think technology has in terms of ending divisiveness?

I'm one of the big believers in AI. I think we ought to put a stake in the ground right now and say, "I wonder what impact AI will have on social network activity?" I was around in the very early days of the internet. It was hard to predict exactly the way things would go and how fast e-commerce and email would take off. And it went very fast, for good and for bad. AI is the same thing. We're in the nascent stage and it's really hard to predict how it will go.

Having been around in the early '90s and late '80s, I think we'll see the same evolution for AI. I'm sort of hopeful that it will give people more of an opportunity for reflection than just the echo chambers we've talked about before. Perhaps AI will open the echo chambers. I think it will be less of an echo chamber for each individual, the more they start to use it. I'm not sure the algorithms will be as malicious as

they are with social media. I think people get online and start to ask questions and they don't get this one-sided viewpoint they get from social media.

Your other big area of giving over the past 25 years has been to the arts, particularly in Los Angeles. Are you changing that, given this administration's narrowing scope of what it deems acceptable art to fund?

The arts funding came along after we established the foundation as focusing on social service and social justice. I had a personal interest in arts organizations, and I felt like if I could get involved in arts funding, I could bring that same lens to broaden the outreach, combining a passion for that and working from the inside. We're not really changing that focus, and we are open to particular programmatic funding if it makes sense to us.

At the [L.A. Phil](#), for example, I had the opportunity to be part of the board that helped recruit Gustavo Dudamel [the young, charismatic Venezuelan music and artistic director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic who is leaving for the New York Philharmonic in 2026]. He was the right person at the right time. My arts funding has been about this personal interest of mine and helping these organizations broaden their outreach to underserved, more diverse communities, giving people more opportunity to attend, such as through streaming, community concerts and other ways. For example, the L.A. Phil has a program now that provides a pathway for students from underprivileged areas to intern and perhaps audition for the orchestra, where they wouldn't have been able to do that otherwise.

I was on the board of the Kennedy Center for 12 years. That story tells itself. I was on the board, appointed by Obama the first time and then I bridged the first Trump administration, and was reappointed by President Biden. In my entire experience on the board, it was bipartisan. We all worked together in service of the mission of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the memorial to President Kennedy. It was all bipartisan until now. We just have to

wait and see at this point when there will be an opportunity to rebalance.

What do you think about the L.A. art scene now, 25 years after you began your foundation? So much has been written about the tremendous growth in arts organizations in L.A. How do you see it now, and as compared to New York City?

I spend a lot of time in New York and in L.A. Part of me wishes we had a model like many European cities where the government provides a stipend for people who are in the arts. I think the economic pressures make it hard in both cities for people to find work and to practice their art. I just have an economic overlay that both cities have challenges that make it very difficult for people in the arts, and I think we all suffer because of that.

What's on your horizon that you're excited about?

We've just published our 25th anniversary book, and that's been very energizing for us, to hear the reactions from people. All these many years later, we're at 25, and as energized as ever to keep going.

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