

# The Nelson Meers Foundation

*By Nelson Meers, Founder of the Nelson Meers Foundation*

We created the Nelson Meers Foundation when we first became aware in 1989 that legislation to enable the establishment of Prescribed Private Funds (PPFs) was mooted. However, the concept of the Foundation was something we had discussed as a family for many years. My commitment to philanthropy was sparked over 40 years ago, when I had the opportunity to observe first-hand how philanthropy had created some of America's greatest and most important institutions.

We discussed as a family what our giving priorities should be, taking into account the funds that would be available to the Foundation and the level of funding enjoyed by the various sectors we were interested in. Two principles guided our decision-making; that it was important to choose just one focus area, so that we could develop some level of expertise in that area; and that we could sustain an enthusiastic commitment. We unanimously agreed upon the arts, which we see as an extremely useful and often underrated means of dealing with disadvantage.

My eldest daughter, Samantha, is the Foundation's Executive Director, and all members of the family are involved in decision-making on various levels. What has delighted me is that everyone wants to be involved, and everyone has an opinion!

I believe that children can become involved in family philanthropy as soon as they are capable of appreciating the importance of the Foundation's activities. We planned the Foundation with the intention that my grandchildren, and subsequent generations, would be involved in due course.

Continuity is important, but I strongly believe that this is a matter for each generation to consider afresh. Philanthropy is something that cannot be done well or effectively without commitment and enthusiasm. I hope that I have instilled in my children a strong belief in the importance of philanthropy, and that they will in turn communicate this to their children, so that the Nelson Meers Foundation will endure for many generations. So far, the joint enterprise of philanthropic activities has been an emulsion for a closer family, and the Foundation has



*Nelson Meers, Founder and Samantha Meers, Executive Director, Nelson Meers Foundation.*

definitely been a means of strengthening family bonds.

The importance of civic responsibility is central to my public philanthropy, and this is a value I have sought to instill in my children. The willingness of my children to participate in, and actively support, our philanthropic activity is, I hope, an indication that I succeeded in some small measure in this mission.

I often say that I don't wish to burden my children with uncomfortable wealth, because I don't want to curtail their own ambitions. We discussed this as a family, and my children supported the establishment of the Foundation with the knowledge that I would be giving away their inheritance!

We considered a sunset clause, but rejected it because we didn't wish to set arbitrary time constraints on the Foundation's existence. It will be a matter for each generation to develop its own philosophy according to the times. Perhaps the Nelson Meers Foundation's funding priorities will shift over time, but we believe that the flexibility of the PPF structure will accommodate

this. I hope that the Foundation will therefore be 'renewable' because of the different interests and passions of each generation.

Communication is very important because we believe passionately in the need for philanthropy. There are many ugly faces of capitalism, but it is inextricably linked with democracy. This is why it is essential that those that have benefited from the capitalist system demonstrate conspicuously a desire to contribute to society.

We believe strongly in the 'conspicuous philanthropy' model, and we have therefore followed a positive strategy of speaking publicly about our giving, and the benefits of philanthropy more generally. Anonymous giving does little to encourage others, nor does it assist the organisation you are supporting. Anonymous giving also implies a passive role in the giving process. We believe it's important to have a positive, interactive relationship with the organisations we support. I think people often underestimate the great pleasure and learning that one derives from these relationships.