

The Interview

By Jeff Stoodt
Milton Times contributor



“Our work is giving black” is a slogan that you’ll find on the website of New England Blacks in Philanthropy (NEBiP)

The organization, established in 2007, has Bithiah Carter, a Milton resident, as its president and CEO.

Carter took time to discuss her work with me. Here’s our interview.

Q: *A couple of years ago, you gave a talk about how NEBiP was reframing what giving, investing, and philanthropy look like in black communities. This may be difficult, but could you share some of what you said?*

A: Giving is like charity. There’s not much thought given to it. “There but for the grace of God,” the giver may think. Investing or social investing is trying to retrofit a business analogy onto something that is unbusinesslike: people’s lives. The outcomes can get crazy.

Philanthropy helps us think through how we can have a better future. It moves the conversation into a space that asks, “What can we do better? How do we measure it? How do we retrofit the message to say ‘We’re all in this together?’”

In Zulu tribes there’s the idea of horizontal philanthropy, that the giver and receiver are equal and the recipient returns the gift. A circle is created. Too often people think of philanthropy in terms of paying it forward. They think, “Once I get on my feet and I have tons of money, then I’ll give,” but an alternate view of philanthropy is that it creates community.

That’s what this pandemic is doing. Everyone’s at home. We see the value of all of us being of service and being served. The worth of equity and equality is more apparent.

Sometimes we focus too much on treasure rather than valuing giving time and talent.

Q: *Historically black giving has been undervalued. Blacks are often not seen as potential donors or asked to join boards. What effect does this have on the health and*

wealth of not only black communities, but all communities?

A: It’s been said that he that controls image controls the mind and unfortunately, this seems true. When we think of a poor, single mother we never think of a mother in Wellesley or Hingham. We think of a person of color. Is this an image that nonprofits help perpetuate? The fact of the matter is that all of us go through struggles like these. Not acknowledging that truth has a horrible effect on all communities.

Given this situation, how can we truly live in our truth and light? How can we share our joys and fears and create a more complete community?

People in the Black, Latinx and Asian-American communities are not seen as potential donors and have never been asked to give or serve on boards because of the images people have of them. People think, “They don’t measure up to the donor class — the super-rich, the people in the .01 percent like Bill Gates or Warren Buffett,” but they are not the true donor class statistically. It’s more ordinary people. We’re not walking into our power. We have the obligation and opportunity to create the world we want with our giving. We need to see that.

Q: *In a TV interview last year, you discussed a Giving Boston study that was underway. Its goal was to explore how to democratize philanthropy. What measures do you think need to be taken to achieve this goal?*

A: When philanthropy is democratized, people see each other and celebrate each other. The Milton Foundation for Education is a good example. Everyone counts in that organization. Everyone’s voice matters. That’s how you measure it.

Q: *On NEBiP’s website, the claim is made that the demographics of philanthropy have changed tremendously*

over the past 20 or 30 years. Furthermore, it says a new breed of philanthropists is being created. Could you elaborate on this change?

A: In the distant past, many people thought that giving at church was philanthropy or they thought of people like Andrew Carnegie, who wrote the famous article “The Gospel of Wealth” that guided his peers on the subject.

The old way was all about inheriting wealth and practicing noblesse oblige. It had the air of “I know what’s best for you. Let me expand educational opportunities.” It was not about achieving equity.

The new philanthropist has made his or her money rather than inherit it. They’re also a diverse group. I think of women like Abby Johnson of Fidelity or people of color like Omar Simmons, another Miltonian. He’s on the board of the Hyams Foundation.

These new donors know what’s best for us. They are trying to figure out what equality means. They wrestle with promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. They are not bound by the restrictions of their parents who may not have thought much of such things.

Q: *What inspires you about the work that your organization does?*

A: I’m inspired not only by my work, but by where I live. How can we create more places like Milton in our world? It’s so wonderfully diverse. We’re not perfect, but we’re striving to improve. We have a thing here that’s closer to where our organization wants to go. We seek a horizontal philanthropy — one that’s democratic with a vision in which we see ourselves as humans and all in it together. That’s a spirit that I detect in Milton.

Q: *You have worked on Wall Street. There you had a mentor who taught you to be prepared for anything. Given the pandemic crisis, what advice can you offer our readers?*

A: Be prepared to be kind. Our kindness and character will pull us through. Know that we have more in common than we don’t. Appreciate our diversity and know that by becoming more equitable and inclusive, we can all get through this together.



Bithiah Carter

Standish Village launches virtual storytime for kids

Standish Village Assisted Living in Boston has launched a creative way for residents to stay connected and engaged with people outside of the senior community.

It launched a “virtual storytime” in late March in which residents take turns reading to an audience of children and their families.

Standish Village has been inundated with requests to read to families near and far. One virtual classroom had students living as far away as California and England.

The idea was thought up by EnrichedLIFE Director Lauren Basler, who normally takes a group of residents to read to children at the Mildred Avenue School in Mattapan through a “power lunch” program.

“With schools being closed and residents unable to go out, I wanted to continue this connection virtually,” Basler stated. “I posted a request on Facebook and have received weeks’ worth of offers.”

To see more #StandishStorytime pictures, go to www.Facebook.com/StandishVillage.



Mary Keeley reads to the Holland family from Newark, Delaware. (Photo courtesy Sarah Georges)

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