



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The disproportionate impacts of coronavirus on Black and Brown communities, the killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and too many others, and the protests against racism they have ignited have all laid bare the deep injustices that continue to define this country. The Levi Strauss Foundation believes that all funders—including corporate foundations—should take a more active role in tackling these longstanding inequities by strengthening the leadership of vulnerable communities, funding grassroots organizations led by people of color, and calling for greater systems change.

In its new report, *Pioneers 2020: Funding the Frontlines of Social Justice*, the foundation shares the story of a major, multiyear effort to fund frontline grassroots leaders driving place-based change on the most pressing social justice issues of our times. “Funding grassroots leaders has made us realize that there is tremendous room for foundations to make a difference,” said Levi Strauss Foundation executive director Daniel Lee. “We are looking at the world around us and putting our voice, influence, and dollars on the line.”

PIONEERS IN JUSTICE

In 2010, the Levi Strauss Foundation debuted its first Pioneers in Justice initiative, a five-year effort to support social justice leaders in its hometown of San Francisco.¹ The initiative helped new Gen-X leaders of color assuming the helm at bedrock civil rights organizations shift their nonprofits from old ways of working to embracing “2.0” methods of building networks and

movements. It also showed the foundation the power of making multiyear investments in social justice leaders, and quickly became its hometown strategy.

In late 2015, the Levi Strauss Foundation earmarked \$3.6 million, over four years, to fund a second round of Pioneers in Justice, named Pioneers 2020. Whereas the original Pioneers were leaders of established “grasstops” organizations, the new Pioneers were community organizers operating on the frontlines of social change. They were grassroots leaders in the truest sense—working deep inside their communities, building bases, growing movements, and tackling issues at the level of root cause in order to drive systemic change.

The seven grassroots leaders who participated in Pioneers 2020—Michael McBride of Faith in Action’s Live Free Campaign, Kris Hayashi of the Transgender Law Center, Zach Norris of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Vanessa Moses of Causa Justa Just Cause, Miya Yoshitani of the Asian Pacific

¹ To read more about the first round of the Pioneers in Justice program, see *Pioneers in Justice: Building Networks and Movements for Social Change*, Levi Strauss Foundation, 2014.

Environmental Network, Terry Valen of the Filipino Community Center, and Aparna Shah of Power California—are at the forefront of policy change in the areas of gender, climate change, criminal justice, LGBTQ rights, racial equity, immigrant rights, and gun violence.

By working with leaders on the frontlines, the foundation saw an opportunity to move its work into the heart of marginalized communities facing deep injustice and fighting for change from the ground up. Additionally, these particular leaders were poised to break through onto a bigger stage, enabling their communities and movements to gain broader attention. “I think it was a huge strength of the foundation to bring in this particular cohort of leaders who represent a whole different aspect of the movement ecology that’s out there,” said Pioneer Miya Yoshitani.

Grassroots leaders in local communities, like the Pioneers, are often severely underfunded in a field that gravitates toward nationally branded “grasstops” organizations. While there is recent momentum around supporting social movements, the funding for this work remains anemic—with almost none coming from corporate foundations. Between 2003 and 2016, the median corporate foundation directed just 3.2 percent of its grantmaking to social justice; most of that was funneled to nationally branded nonprofits. Pioneers 2020 sought to correct that imbalance and pioneer a model that other funders might follow.

RAPID LEARNING, RAPID CHANGE

For the Levi Strauss Foundation, Pioneers 2020 started out as a replication project shaped around the same themes that guided the first program: wielding technology as a tool for social change, driving “networked” forms of collaboration, and building leadership voice. However, the foundation soon learned that working with grassroots leaders was different from working with leaders of more established “grasstops” nonprofits. As activists, the new Pioneers came with a healthy critique of capitalism, philanthropy, and anything that seemed too “top down.”

But the results of the November 2016 election thrust both the Pioneers and the foundation into a new context: The Pioneers wrestled with how to continue advancing social justice even as the ground beneath their feet eroded, while the foundation sought new

pathways for supporting vulnerable communities. This prompted a shift in the Pioneers 2020 strategy; the foundation asked the Pioneers to identify their emerging priorities as leaders of important social justice issues and movements. Consequently, the foundation scrapped its theory of change in order to make way for what was needed. “The needs of the people they were there to support became so immediate, that we had to pivot,” explained foundation board member Seth Jaffe.

The foundation rapidly reoriented the Pioneers 2020 grant strategy around three types of support: capacity grants to help leaders shore up their organizations and stretch to reach new scale; “leap” grants supporting projects that represented a catalytic jump forward for their organizations or movements; and resilience and well-being grants supporting the Pioneers’ ability to bring self-care to their organizations and address trauma and burnout. With so much shifting, building fellowship between the foundation and the Pioneers also became a priority. The foundation team and the Pioneers went through Rockwood Leadership Institute’s weeklong Art of Leadership program together, forging new trust. The Pioneers and the foundation board also began meeting for occasional meals, sparking a rare boundary-crossing fellowship. “It was an effort to bring these worlds together,” said Daniel Lee.

These tighter connections led to another unanticipated dynamic—Levi Strauss & Co. drawing on the experience and wisdom of these Pioneers to craft its own groundbreaking corporate platforms and policies. Pioneer Mike McBride’s insights helped inform the company’s emerging anti-gun violence platform and bring communities of color to the center of that discussion, while Pioneer Kris Hayashi advised LS&Co. in crafting and socializing its first Global Transgender and Gender Transition Guideline. Said Lee: “These Pioneers have changed the way we bring our voice, our influence, and our values to bear on fueling social justice.”

For the Pioneers, this was an almost unheard-of opportunity to extend their reach into the private sector; their alliance with a corporate foundation also built their visibility and created a larger platform for their causes. As Kris Hayashi reflected: “Building a relationship with Levi Strauss & Co. raised the impact

of our organization's work, and the movements and campaigns that we represent." Added Mike McBride: "The company is helping others not see us as radical or ancillary."

At the outset of *Pioneers 2020*, all of these leaders were doing outstanding local work and were poised to break through onto larger stages. The *Pioneers* program contributed to the capacity of these leaders to scale their work, experiment with new approaches, and attend to the well-being of their organizations. The *Pioneers* program also gave many of them newfound confidence serving as voices of their organizations and movements and new fluency in adapting their messages to different audiences.

LESSONS FOR FUNDERS

Pioneers 2020: Funding the Frontlines of Social Justice offers valuable advice for other funders eager to engage with grassroots leaders. Through *Pioneers*

2020, the Levi Strauss Foundation learned essential lessons about how to work with grassroots leaders, including the critical importance of building trust and the need to pivot in response to shifting circumstances. The report also delves into what funders must do beyond the grant to elevate traditionally underrepresented groups into leadership—from connecting grassroots grantees with networking opportunities and welcoming them into the board room, to cultivating trusted relationships based on common values.

This report serves as a powerful statement of the Levi Strauss Foundation's commitment to grassroots leaders and as an invitation to other corporations and funders to support community leaders as well. "These *Pioneers* have shown us the importance of local work at the deepest level; they have inspired us to take new risks at a time when power and privilege are being widely reexamined," said Lee. "We need more corporate foundations funding at the grassroots level and helping to ensure that these local leaders succeed."

Pioneers 2020

» **KRIS HAYASHI** is executive director of the **Transgender Law Center**, the largest national trans-led organization advocating for a world in which all people are free to define themselves and their futures.

transgenderlawcenter.org

» **MIKE MCBRIDE** is director of Faith in Action's **Live Free Campaign**, a leader in the movement to implement public health and community-centered gun violence prevention programs in cities across the country.

livefreeusa.org

» **VANESSA MOSES** is executive director of **Causa Justa Just Cause**, a Bay Area grassroots social movement organization focused on achieving justice for low-income communities of color.

cjjc.org

» **ZACH NORRIS** is executive director of the **Ella Baker Center for Human Rights**, which organizes with Black, Brown, and low-income people to shift resources away from prisons and punishment and toward new opportunities for community safety.

ellabakercenter.org

» **APARNA SHAH** is senior advisor to **Power California**, an organization building the power of young people of color and their families to participate and lead systems of government at all levels in California.

powercalifornia.org

» **TERRY VALEN** is executive director of the San Francisco-based **Filipino Community Center**, dedicated to providing a safe space where Filipino families can access services, receive support, and build community.

filipinocc.org

» **MIYA YOSHITANI** is executive director of the **Asian Pacific Environmental Network**, which builds the leadership of low-income Asian immigrant and refugee communities to fight for environmental justice.

apen4ej.org

TO READ THE FULL REPORT, PLEASE
DOWNLOAD FROM [LEVISTRAUSS.COM/
VALUES-IN-ACTION/LEVI-STRAUSS-
FOUNDATION/PIONEERS-2020](https://levistrauss.com/values-in-action/levi-strauss-foundation/pioneers-2020).



ABOUT PIONEERS IN JUSTICE

In 2010, the Levi Strauss Foundation launched a first-of-its kind initiative designed to help local social justice organizations amplify both their reach and their impact. Through Pioneers in Justice, LSF set out to support a cohort of Bay Area leaders, all of them Gen Xers, who had recently taken the helm of legacy social justice organizations and were charged with helping their nonprofits adapt to a rapidly changing world.

In 2016, LSF launched a second round of Pioneers in Justice, called Pioneers 2020. Whereas the original Pioneers were leaders of established “grasstops” organizations, these new Pioneers were seasoned community organizers operating on the frontlines of dynamic social change. By partnering with grassroots leaders, LSF aimed to move its work into the very heart of marginalized communities facing deep injustice and fighting for transformative change from the ground up.

LEVI STRAUSS FOUNDATION

The Levi Strauss Foundation is the corporate foundation of Levi Strauss & Co., one of the world’s largest brand-name apparel companies. The foundation’s philanthropic work is grounded in the company’s values of originality, integrity, empathy, and courage.

For over 60 years, the Levi Strauss Foundation has embraced the energy and events of our time to advance pioneering social change in the areas of HIV/AIDS, worker rights and well-being, and social justice in the communities where the company has a business presence.