

Spring 2011 Charles N. Kimball Lecture
Thursday, April 21, 2011

Charles N. Kimball: A Mentor to the Community

A coach gave a direction to his players before they started each contest: “You are the luckiest people in the world, you are capable of great things, go out there and make something happen.” He might have borrowed this formula from Charlie Kimball, except Charlie’s instruction was to all of us and to all of Kansas City. Today we honor his 100th birthday and that instruction.

Charlie Kimball’s life narrative had many paths. In total, however, they can be summed up, as Morton Sosland reminds us, in Charlie’s determination to make something happen. It was his conviction that he was capable of “making something happen” that probably accounts for his decision to come to Kansas City in 1950 to lead Midwest Research Institute (MRI), and for his success once he got here and captivated the city and its citizens.

His personal assessment is telling: “Where else but Kansas City could a poor Irish boy make something of himself? Kansas City had the most welcoming leadership” — that is, for employment of his many talents—and the perfect platform, MRI, for partnership and labors. He had a lifelong appreciation for those with wealth and position because all innovations started with dollars and a head start. He had both with MRI and its founders and community leadership.

He was forever indebted to the “dollar a day” guys—J.C. Nichols, C. J. Patterson, Robert Mehornay, and Kenneth Spencer, in particular—because they saw the opportunities for Kansas City in the economic development of World War II, especially in the government contracts and defense plants that were a necessary part of it. These men worked to make sure Kansas City had its share of government work and jobs. They were successful in ensuring Kansas City’s participation in a domestic economic “boom” created by World War II technology advances. They and a handful of other business leaders also believed a research and scientific partner was essential to Kansas City’s participation and to its post war prosperity. MRI was that partner launched in 1944.

Charlie had first come to Kansas City in 1941 to work as vice president and director of the Aircraft Accessory Corporation, later called Aireon Manufacturing Company, a high tech telecommunications company. He had his Harvard PhD in Communications Engineering (the closest thing to telecommunications at that time) in the early 1930’s, after which he joined RCA for research on FM radio, radar and early versions of color TV. RCA selected him as a principal spokesman for explaining to a variety of audiences, in down to earth terms, technical developments in electronics and communications. Charlie totally enjoyed this responsibility and became quite successful in this part of his employment. He also greatly enjoyed teaching electronics at New York University. These experiences made him less satisfied with routines of lab work, however. When Aireon, a licensee affiliate of RCA and subcontractor, invited him to join that company

at better pay, he moved to Kansas City. He had enjoyed New York, its opera and its track meets, and its baseball, but the quality of life was poor—“it was dull and grey”.

In the course of Aireon work with Kansas City businesses, he met William Deramus Sr., Chairman of Kansas City Southern Railway. Deramus and Charlie created a system and devices to permit communication between and with trains using low frequency band FM radio, which up to then only used by taxi cabs. Such a system did not require Federal Communications Commission (FCC) approval. This technology freed the railway from its dependence on traditional labor intensive communication technology and its challenging physical plant. The Kansas City Southern installed the new technology from Kansas City to the Gulf of Mexico, with significant savings in labor and capital.

This incident is but one example of Charlie’s encounters at Aireon. There Charlie also employed a young engineer, Edward J. King, later the founder of King Radio, a major avionics manufacturer. You all know of his success.

Charlie moved in 1948 to Detroit to become a technical director of research for Bendix. There he could anticipate a conventional corporate success career path. But his background and his experience in Kansas City made him susceptible to an offer to return. It was C. J. Patterson who in 1950 called Charlie to invite him to return to Kansas City to run MRI and help it escape from what Kimball said “was doing bench science in an old firehouse”. He was happy to come back—he admired the city and its people and readily understood what could be done with MRI. He was perfect for the position—as Irv Hockaday put it, “he combined uncommon visions with compelling advocacy” to make MRI the “lighthouse on the prairie”.

The conventional corporate path Bendix offered had been limiting. He has been described as “blindingly ambitious” and we came to see that in MRI and in the larger context of community ventures. That quality of his character, which motivated him personally to seek and see other opportunities, was augmented by other personal advantages. In addition to his Harvard PhD in a new field of science and technology, his wartime “high-tech” and technology transfer experience at Aireon, and his general management competence, he had another singular skill. Bob Kipp put it this way: “Many of us were always astounded by Charlie’s way of talking to groups of people. It didn’t seem to matter the size of the group. I asked him once how he accounted for his effectiveness. Charlie replied, when I get ready to make a talk to any group, I imagine one person in the audience and I try to make all my remarks as if they were directly to one person.” Charlie thus achieved a unique intimacy and persuasiveness that accounted for his effectiveness with all audiences.

Another of his signature qualities was his focus on “connectivity”—a respect for relationships, creating them, fostering, and supporting them, but in all means bringing people together to a task, to its execution, and to its all important finish, its conclusion. He was constantly alert to the possibility of connections among people, to the possibility of bringing people of diverse talents and resources to some activity that served all and

especially the “community” — its industry, Kansas City, the region and this nation. He represented a unique ability to gather people for a shared enterprise.

Linked to Charlie’s communication skills and focus on connectivity was a capacity to see himself, and to act, as a mentor, as a guide to ensure personal and enterprise success. In this, as with his achievements in “connectivity”, he was aided by shrewdness in taking the measure of an individual and in helping that person realize the best of himself and of the situation, and by his personal intensity. One of his admirers, David Bodde, the first Charles Kimball Professor, Technology and Innovation at the Bloch School, said: “It’s a gift of a great mentor that you are going to make a difference”. Many witnesses have spoken of this quality as important in their lives and their personal success in other ventures and venues.

Some believe that he taught these skills to William Deramus III who mentored the people with principal roles in enterprises he started: among others, were Tom Carter, Irv Hockaday, Tom McDonnell, Al Mauro, Phil Kirk, and this speaker.

In these several aspects of building collaborations and mentoring industries and individuals, he was a visionary — for enterprise, for people and so, covertly, for himself. “He was an enabler — when he found a person who would take the ball and run with it he would see that they got the ball and that he would provide or find support for him.” David Bodde, so described him.

From his experience with RCA as a speaker, an explainer of new technology, from his conviction that the war’s aftermath would create opportunities for technology transfer from government to private business, and from his belief in the future of Kansas City, Charlie Kimball became a trusted instigator to the already aroused business leadership. His portfolio of ventures, public and private, for-profit and non-profit, is beyond summary. Please make allowances for the incomplete list which follows. Some are worth revisiting, however. We need the reminder of their mission, their effects, and their endurance.

A MRI report from Charlie summarized its work during this period:

In 1957, I served as deputy chairman for President Eisenhower’s White House conference on technical and distribution research for the benefit of small businesses. Most smaller businesses had no idea of the ways that technology could help them, so we hoped to answer questions and pass on whatever information might be useful.

MRI also conducted research in the manufacture of vaccines, in hearing aids, aircraft controls, and cost and quality control measures for business, just to name a few examples of research which could influence and benefit the public. Several members of the MRI staff traveled around the Midwest to explain what could be done with technology transfer, using plain language, demonstrating new products and processes that might be useful to Midwestern companies.

“Technology Transfer” — the transfer of specialized technology from one industry to more generalized use among many industries, to “early stage” enterprise was an

expression of the enduring commitment of Charlie and MRI to entrepreneurs and small business.

Out of this record of leading technology transfer came unprecedented opportunity. With Senator Stuart Symington's help in 1960, NASA's Director Jim Webb called upon MRI to oversee and promote the transfer of technology produced by NASA's enlarged assignment for space exploration. The development of TANG, the dried orange juice, as a consumer product is one modest example of MRI's success in this undertaking.

By this time MRI had already assisted Folgers in improving its dried coffee to make it easily manufactured and better tasting. A similar experience with the coatings of M&M's, which tended to "melt" in your hands before they got into your mouth, led to an MRI "fix" and M&M's product success. These successes were second nature after Charlie's earlier experience with Bill Deramus, Sr. and Kansas City Southern Railway.

Charlie was exceptionally proud of MRI's role in solar energy research and its management of the Solar Energy Research Institute (SERI) in Golden, Colorado, now the National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL). That contract was managed by MRI since 1977 and established it as a leader in solar research innovation.

Charlie envisioned the mission of MRI in its largest potential. But he also saw that a library of science, technology, and engineering was essential to realize the community's most expansive hopes for economic development in a new age. Accordingly he saw the essential role of the Linda Hall Library and he worked closely with Joseph Shipmen, the director, and the Library's founders to ensure that the Library was a capable partner to MRI and enterprises of every kind for all aspects of science, technology, and engineering. Today the Linda Hall Library is the world's largest private library focusing on science, technology and engineering.

Charlie was determined to make "science work" and technology transfer intergenerational. Thus Science Pioneers and the Science Fair were created by Charlie. That Fair is still one of the largest in the country. It remains very influential in identifying and encouraging young scientists and their teachers and has become a national phenomenon.

Charlie's instinct for teaching and mentoring went beyond young people and included young executives. His role in founding and enlarging the impact of the Young President's Organization (YPO) is well known to many executives in Kansas City and elsewhere. Barnett Helzberg, a longtime admirer of Charlie, recounted an incident in which Charlie gave, in Barnett's view, definitive advice in hiring decisions: "Don't ever take a reference on the phone—always talk to the reference face to face, eye to eye—even if you have to go to some trouble to have a direct encounter". Barnett said he violated this rule one time to his great embarrassment and disappointment.

The notion of "strategic philanthropy" was a larger application and expression of his passion for creating durable community assets. Don Hall emphasized the importance of this feature of Charlie's work and how this goal at the end led to his leadership in

establishing the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation in 1978, over the resistance of several banks fearing losses to their trust departments. He saw in such a version of philanthropy the expression of Kansas City's unique collaborative and mentoring capabilities. It was the legacy of collective help and partnering which he most admired in Kansas City, and which led him to see in the Foundation a means of continuing that legacy into the future. His vision is vindicated by a Community Foundation teaching philanthropy to more people and today has total assets of \$1,131,711,599, and is among the largest in the nation.

Don Hall and Charlie Kimball also worked together to devise Prime Time, a public relations project to enhance Kansas City's visibility and image throughout the nation, identify the city as an area for economic development, and stimulate convention and visitor business for the city. This initiative was unique in city promotion. It enjoyed national success in telling Kansas City's story, and was and is a model for telling the stories of other modern cities.

In this effort Don Hall emphasizes the importance of Charlie as a personal mentor. Every Monday the two men met to discuss what was going on in the city. This mental sharing went both ways, and Charlie never forgot his sense of obligation to Joyce Hall and then to Don.

Don also tells a story to capture Charlie's special individualism and independent spirit. Charlie was accustomed to taking walks on the Mission Hills Golf course. In those walks he pressed on, usually indifferent to those actually playing golf who wished to "play through", and deaf to their calls to get out of their way.

Charlie's reach was international and cultural. In 1976 he used his new-found London connections to work with Ted Coe in the London opening for the path breaking Sacred Circles exhibit of native art assembled by Coe and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

His role in transforming advanced public education for Kansas City is perhaps the most important of his civic engagements. He joined Jack Morgan and Arthur Mag in 1963 to ensure the transfer of the University of Kansas City in to the University of Missouri System. As the University of Missouri-Kansas City, this urban University has grown in its regional and professional impact. Without that transfer the bright future and accomplishments of higher education in Kansas City would have been severely, even fatally, frustrated.

R. Crosby Kemper gives him comparable credit in preserving one of Kansas City's essential heritage institutions—the American Royal. After a lunch in the early 1970's with Kemper and Nathan Stark, Charlie initiated an economic study confirming the annual economic impact of the Royal, now estimated to be upwards of \$82 million per year.

Of all the Kimball witnesses and torch bearers, Jane Mobley was Charlie's amanuensis collaborating with him on most of the books he wrote about his life and

career. She, together with David Boutros, has been the most responsible for keeping the Kimball flame alive. She tells the story of Charlie's encounter with Winston Churchill, arranged by Joyce Hall, which provoked Charlie to adopt the painting avocation Churchill recommended. Charlie followed the directions given in Churchill's book, *Painting as a Pastime*. Many in Kansas City have paintings by Charlie, and they demonstrate his mastery of the painter's craft. Jane also speaks of Charlie's great and abiding regard for Churchill. She described a Churchill cigar stub Charlie kept with other precious objects on his bookcase, to which he gave a touch to bring him luck and inspiration as he left the office for important engagements.

Many of you will remember the Lyric Opera's production of Rossini's *Cinderella La Cenorentola*, retelling that classic story in slightly different operatic terms. Charlie would have warmed to Rossini's version. This opera's fairy godmother was transformed into its godfather who came to present a more kindly realistic, avuncular figure—who intervenes in Cinderella's squalid life to give her a bright future. Alidoro, the "godfather", comes to the house where Cinderella is cleaning—he is dressed in disguise. In essence he says to her: "Far in the mysterious depths of the heavens there moves a god who knows the potential for goodness and intervenes on behalf of the good." Imagine this good natured Irish American, this self described "rough and tumble Irish American", presenting himself modestly as a kindly intervener, a kindly instigator, or better yet an agent provocateur, in the life of Kansas City, at an opportune moment in the life of the nation and this community, with its leaders already in readiness, and then leading in their transformation. In that benign sense Charlie Kimball was a godfather to all, and to much that we admire today and carry on. Irv Hockaday said Charlie believed that dreams were more important than memories. Cinderella's dreams became reality through her godfather's good offices. Charlie's dreams, still working in us, are also coming true.

Irv concluded an early Midcontinent Perspective talk on transportation with an observation by Emerson: "This time, like all times, is a very good time, if we but know what to do with it." Charlie showed us how while at the same time he acknowledged the limitation of time and personal energy. Dan Serda reminds us that on Charlie's last day he left an uncharacteristically, unpunctuated note with the directive—"so much left to do..."

Recently Bob Meneilly began a large meeting with a blessing that invoked that compelling perspective. This was it, but now as a benediction for all celebrants of Charlie's 100th birthday: "The best don't have the best of everything; they just make the best of everything"—and, we must say, also of the people who came their way. That was Charles Kimball's way.

He was among the best. We are all the better for it and for his on going.

Landon H. Rowland
4/21/11

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This birthday “card” could not have been prepared without a lot of help from Charlie’s friends and close witnesses. Many of their voices have been used in these remarks. Charlie “cut a wide swath” in the community. He had many friends and admirers. It would not be possible to do justice to all the affectionate greetings on his 100th birthday.

One voice deserves special recognition—that of David Boutros. Because of David’s great regard for Charlie and his legacy, the collection of Charlie’s papers is in the State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Kansas City’s collection. David is also the instigator of this birthday party. All of us are indebted to him for ensuring that the legacy of Charlie Kimball is acknowledged and celebrated and that it goes on.