

Paul Grogan looks back at an estimable career — and forward to the nonprofit future

The former Boston Foundation president hopes his memoir will inspire idealistic young people to work in the community-service sector.

By Scot Lehigh, Globe Columnist

The Boston Globe

March 28, 2024

One of the most talented politicians I've encountered during my years of writing about Massachusetts public affairs isn't a politician or a political consultant but a high-minded guy with no goal beyond pushing Boston and the Commonwealth toward smarter, more effective public policy.

In that role, he was indefatigable, strategic, generous, diplomatic, and personable. He always took the long view and the high road. His has been a journey of impressive accomplishments.

And now, Paul Grogan, the former long-time president and CEO of the Boston Foundation, has a memoir out, distilling laughs and lessons from his lengthy community-service career and urging young people to consider the opportunities there.

In "Be Prepared to Be Lucky: Reflections on Fifty Years of Public and Community Service," Grogan recalls coming to a stalled, stale, and stunted Boston as a young man eager to throw his energies into the nationwide effort to turn around failing cities. He landed a job at Boston City Hall in the administration of Mayor Kevin White, beginning as a 24-year-old policy researcher, becoming a speechwriter, and going on to run several important agencies for the larger-than-life mayor.

White, who believed Boston could be a world-class city at a time when it decidedly wasn't, pursued his vision with vigor and panache. Grogan observed the way the mayor's confident, charismatic persona often carried the day, even in tumultuous times.

"Unless you can 'sell' internally as well as externally, you cannot move an organization or a city," he writes. "A big factor in that was his defiant optimism."

Grogan recounts an East Boston forum, packed with people angry over both a proposed expansion at Logan Airport and court-ordered busing. Concerned for the mayor's safety, Grogan and the local police captain wanted to postpone the meeting, but the mayor wouldn't hear of it.

"Mayor White walked right to the end of the stage and just stood there with his hands on his hips and a big smile on his face," Grogan writes. "Finally the crowd began to quiet and he had his meeting."

White, who served four terms, gave his aides plenty of running room, but he could be a tough boss. In his memoir, Grogan recollects a meeting at which he annoyed the mayor by offering a less-than-germane observation.

"Paul, get in the game," White chided. "You're sitting there with your football helmet on, and we're playing baseball."

Grogan didn't just get in the game, he made himself an indispensable player for the mayor. He became a much-relied-on administrator and policy engineer at a time when community development corporations (CDCs) were taking root as a promising vehicle for matching local activism and energy with public and private resources to rejuvenate city neighborhoods. So well-regarded was he as a manager and bridge-builder that he was the only high-ranking White aide Ray Flynn asked to stay on when he took over as mayor in 1984.

Grogan's City Hall experience led to his 1986 hiring to lead New York City-based Local Initiatives Support Corporation, a national nonprofit, founded and funded in part by the Ford Foundation, that boosts the efforts of community development corporations and other local initiatives across the country.

His 13 years there were impressive enough to inspire this superlative. "There's been no more important person for cities in this country than Paul Grogan," R.T. Rybak, the former mayor of St. Paul, wrote in a blurb for his memoir. "His impact has been greater than any big city mayor."

But it's during his two decades (2001 to 2021) as president of the Boston Foundation that Grogan brought his palette of talents together to such great effect locally, transforming the nonprofit from a quiet, behind-the-scenes grant-making institution to an instantly recognized and highly influential organization, one that took deep informational dives into pressing urban matters, developed policy recommendations, and then systematically built support for them across a broad array of civic areas.

His carefully accumulated lessons? No spoilers here — read his book!

Grogan, now 73, was diagnosed with Parkinson's two years ago. That's forced him to give up skiing, "which was hard," but hasn't daunted his spirits.

"I want people to know that it is possible to live a full and engaged life with

Parkinson's," he told me. "You have to remember that you have Parkinson's — Parkinson's does not have you."

Proceeds from his memoir, co-written with former Cincinnati Foundation president Kathryn Merchant, will go to the Boston Foundation's Civic Leadership Fund. The foundation will hold a forum to discuss Grogan's book on May 1. Grogan hopes to alert young people to the fulfilling opportunities that exist in nonprofit community service.

"A big theme is getting young people interested in this kind of work," he said. "That's one thing I'd like to see come out of this."

Knowing Paul, he'll get that done — and more.

Scot Lehigh is a Globe columnist. He can be reached at scot.lehigh@globe.com. Follow him @GlobeScotLehigh.