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## Most Admired CEOs: James Head is closing a chapter, not the book

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“The greatest teacher, failure is.”

James Head, the outgoing president and CEO of the East Bay Community Foundation (and avid “Star Wars” fan), has taken these words from Yoda to heart in his work to get resources to local underserved communities. It reminds him that the path to success is not always linear.

A lawyer who spent most of his career in civil rights and public-interest law, Head has long worked closely with the nonprofit sector. He arrived in California from his home state of Georgia in 1986 to run a nonprofit legal organization based in Berkeley.

“That’s when I got fully introduced to philanthropy,” he said. After acquainting himself with prominent foundations and donors making real, community-oriented change in the Bay Area, Head was inspired to leave his legal career behind.



LIPO CHING | SAN FRANCISCO BUSINESS TIMES

James Head, as president and CEO of the East Bay Community Foundation, mobilized donors and community organizations to make available resources to the most at-risk communities and individuals during Covid.

He landed at the San Francisco Foundation in 2004 as vice president for programs. There Head met his mentor, then-CEO Dr. Sandra Hernández, who taught him the intricacies of successfully leading a nonprofit organization.

Those lessons proved invaluable when Head became president and CEO of the East Bay Foundation in 2014. The institution mobilizes sources of economic support for its local community partners through fellowships, awards and grants — and it serves five Bay Area counties: Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco and San Mateo.

Its mission is to provide resources that address issues surrounding social justice and economic inequities as well as support programs in early childhood education, the arts and legislative advocacy.

And the pandemic underscored the urgency of what they do.

Head acted quickly to establish a Covid Relief Fund in March 2020 and managed to raise \$7 million.

“We focused our attention and those resources on individuals and families who were not going to be eligible for local, state or federal resources during the pandemic. And these were primarily immigrant families who didn’t have working relationships, families or individuals who were homeless. And so we worked with the nonprofit organizations who worked in those communities and with that population to provide resources,” Head said.

“We streamlined the grant making process so that they could get the money out very quickly,” he said. “These were trusted organizations that could get the resources out to people who really needed them immediately. And so that’s been really fulfilling.”

Covid-19 has shined a harsh spotlight on the already glaring inequities in the Bay Area — a prosperous region for some, yet one where many people struggle on the lower rungs of the economic ladder.

“The pandemic revealed things that we already knew about those who were most in need, whether they were individuals and families of color, communities of color or those who are on the frontlines

working in very low paying jobs that didn't have great medical insurance and coverage," said Head.

A key responsibility of the foundation is also educating donors on why societal inequities exist and persist. It's important that those donating money have empathy toward those the foundation serves.

"One of my tenets is that we all have our differences, but the more information we all have, the more likely we are to understand the situations and environments we see and sometimes make assumptions about," he said.

In January of this year, Head announced that he would be stepping down due to health issues. In an Oct. 22 farewell message posted on the East Bay Community Foundation's website, Head announced his last day would be Oct. 29.

Pamela Calloway has been named interim president and CEO, and Catherine Chen has been named to lead the executive search committee.

Leading up to this time, Head has been thinking about ways that the next leader can lend a fresh pair of eyes to the nonprofit.

"I have a firm belief that as a CEO you constantly have to be thinking about what is the time when you begin to think about what new leadership can do for an organization," he said. "Sometimes as a CEO, you can stay in a position too long — and no one would tell you that because you're the CEO."

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