

Inside Philanthropy

This Michigan-Based Donor Advisor is Building a Firm Foundation for the Progressive Movement

Dawn Wolfe | March 26, 2024

There's a nice anecdote behind how [Ktisis Capital](#) came by its name, which sheds some light on the way the advisory firm's founder, Jason Franklin, approaches the work of guiding progressive donors and foundations. When Franklin was living in New York City in the mid-2000s, he made a habit of stopping by the Met on his way to Sunday brunches with his then-boyfriend. It was during those visits that he was drawn to one of the last existing mosaics of the unique Byzantine goddess, Ktisis — the simultaneous personification of generosity, the importance of planning, and the foundation of a building or city.

When Franklin moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 2015 to become the inaugural W.K. Kellogg Community Philanthropy Chair at the Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University, he decided to create his own advising firm as a side project. The former Bolder Giving executive director and Solidaire Network cofounder didn't want to name the company after himself because one of his goals was to build an organization that made space for others to step into leadership. He ultimately chose to honor the Byzantine goddess, Franklin said, because he liked the goddess' attributes combining generosity with the importance of planning and lasting foundations.

“You cannot create long-term change without a really stable base — without a foundation that's been put in place, whether that's analysis or organization or both,” he said.

This year, the Michigan-based Ktisis Capital will assist high-net-worth individual and family donors in moving as much as \$35 million, while also influencing the direction of between \$500 million and \$700 million in foundation funds. The majority of the firm's clients are in the U.S., but Ktisis is



international in scope, with clients in Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

The three Ktisis clients I contacted at random for input all praised the firm, Franklin, or both, for their work, ranging from advising Panta Rhea Foundation's democracy portfolio during the 2016 elections to the “deep dive” the Ktisis team has engaged in with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Racial Equity and Community Engagement grant portfolio.

“Ktisis has been really instrumental in helping us map a way forward with overall strategy and where we really need to center our time and energy going

forward,” said Vicky Stott, Kellogg’s senior program officer for racial equity and community engagement.

IP recently spoke with Franklin over two wide-ranging conversations that touched on issues including the history and growth of his firm, American vs. international philanthropy, and whether or not progressives give too much credit to right-wing funders and organizers.

“I committed academic heresy”

Franklin hadn’t had much time to settle into his “dream job” at Grand Valley State before Donald Trump became president in 2016. Despite Franklin’s continued service to progressive philanthropy as a volunteer, “I couldn’t stay in the academy while the world was burning,” he said, “and so I committed academic heresy and left an endowed professorship to become a consultant — the most-secure to the least-secure role you can take on.”

Franklin may blame Trump for his decision to make Ktisis a full-time job, but the move has paid off. Ktisis has a staff of eight, including Franklin, and is also an umbrella for nine affiliate consultants (one of whom is in Australia) and two fellows. Franklin explained that the fellowship program is designed to diversify the field of philanthropic consulting.

“Historically, one of the things we know is that privilege influences who ends up in advising,” he said, “and diversity matters for many reasons. Among them, who’s in the room impacts which conversations get had and what lived experience those people bring into the conversations.”

Franklin said his firm has extended the term of its two current fellows and plans to add two more in 2024. The fellowships are part-time positions that are paid at an hourly rate comparable to Ktisis’ full-time associates.

Ktisis doesn’t provide fiduciary services or host DAFs, but it does provide most of the services that progressive donors may need to conduct their giving. The [firm’s offerings](#) include advising on grantmaking, strategy and program design; program and operational support; and research, learning opportunities and governance advice for funders.

The bottom line is that Ktisis isn’t a hot-take, trend-chasing outfit. Like the company’s namesake, it’s a place to go to build a firm foundation. It’s also an

organization with its own point of view. “We are explicitly committed to racial, social, economic and environmental justice,” Franklin said. “There are many brilliant, amazing individual philanthropic advisors and donor organizers who share those values, but most of the institutions are more values-neutral,” even if the people working there are more progressive. Ktisis is willing to meet clients where they are, Franklin said, but has also decided a client wasn’t the right fit if the person pushed back too hard on issues like tax and philanthropic reform.

“It’s not because we’re better”

Asked the difference between American and international philanthropy and what one side might learn from the other, Franklin said the main thing is a matter of scale.

“There are no parallels for the scale of U.S. philanthropy and the U.S. nonprofit sector in any other country in the world,” he said. The downside, of course, is that the U.S.’s vast economic inequality, regressive taxation, and weak social safety net combine to make the philanthropies possible and the nonprofits essential. In Stockholm a few years ago, a European lamented to Franklin about the ways their nonprofit sector was behind that of the U.S.

“I said, ‘It’s important to understand, I have spent my entire career trying to organize and harness the power of philanthropy to support movements that are fighting for a government system closer to what you already have,’” Franklin recalled.

On the other hand, the comparative scale of US philanthropy provides a lot more data from which organizations in other countries can learn. Citing the U.S.’s large population, which includes tens of thousands of major donors, over 100,000 foundations and donor advised funds, and roughly [1.8 million nonprofits](#), Franklin noted that we can learn from patterns visible at that scale and share that information with international counterparts.

“The conversations are just as sophisticated in Australia as they are in the U.S.,” Franklin said, “but the examples are fewer. And so the range of experiments are fewer, because there are simply fewer people.” At the same time, he said, the U.S. can serve as both a warning to other countries about the dangers of letting economic inequality become out of control, and insights about what people can do

to address creeping wealth consolidation in their own countries.

Franklin also offered a caution for other philanthropic advisors who may want to expand internationally. Too often, he said, American advisors tend to offer their recommendations with a healthy dose of American exceptionalism.

In contrast, Franklin takes the approach that he has knowledge and Americans have experiences to share because of the scale of our philanthropic sector and the structures that this scale makes possible. “But it's not because we're better. It's simply because there's a difference, and there's things to learn from difference.”

“We give too much credit to the organization of the right”

A lot has been written, including here at IP, about the long-term tenacity and success of conservative philanthropy and organizing in attacking reproductive, voting and other individual rights. For Franklin, the situation is much more nuanced.

“I actually think that on the left, we sometimes give too much credit to the organization of the right,” he said. On the right, “[the Powell memo](#) always gets held up as an example, but there are also dozens and dozens of memos that were written that were not followed, and that we don't hear about because they didn't work out.”

Meanwhile, Franklin believes that progressives tend to downplay both their successes and the ways that the right tries to copy those successes. The Tea Party, Franklin said, was a “mimic reaction to the movement success of the left,” while the Koch network was in some ways a reaction to the perceived success of the Democracy Alliance. At the same time, progressives have also won victories through sustained, disciplined effort — most recently, the legal recognition of same-sex couples’ right to marry. Even progressive movements that haven’t yet won what we might consider decisive victories have changed the narrative landscape. The Occupy movement created public consciousness of wealth inequality through its focus on the 1%, “and the Movement for Black Lives, for all of its fracturing and challenges, galvanized and changed the way we talk about civil rights and racial justice in the modern era.”

One big challenge facing any successful movement, Franklin said, is the difficulty of taking an initiative “the one last step.” Take, for example, *Roe v. Wade*, “a landmark decision that never translated into final legislative action, and so the right to choose was always a judicially determined right rather than a legislated right. But, as we've seen since *Dobbs*, abortion is as powerful a motivating force on the left as it is the right — it's always easier to fight back versus doing the one last step. It's why I can never get from a 36 to a 34 waist.”