

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 37 – Michael Marsicano – Visionary Catalyst

Intellectual Honesty

And now a personal word,

Before my conversation with Michael Marsicano for this podcast, I've had one or two discussions with Michael over the years and not for very long. They may have totaled a combined ten minutes. The foundation was one of many sponsors of *Charlotte Viewpoint*, a civic and cultural magazine I founded, and Michael wrote two articles that *Charlotte Viewpoint* published: one in 2007 entitled "The Kindness of Strangers" and one in 2009 entitled "The Foundation For The Carolinas Response to the Economic Crisis." My interactions with him for those articles were primarily through intermediaries. When I did talk with him, he was always gracious and complimentary of my efforts.

But there was one exchange with Michael that changed the dynamic, at least for me. In 2007, the foundation announced its expansion of its mission into civic leadership. I wrote an article entitled "Questioning the Foundation." In the article, I expressed concern about how formal civic-leadership initiatives at the foundation would further concentrate power at the foundation and would limit the growth of grassroots leadership in the city. I wrote my article at the same time *Charlotte Viewpoint* was eligible for additional funding from the foundation. I sent in my grant application. Michael and his team called me into the foundation offices and let me know they were unhappy with my article. My funding request was soon denied. It felt retaliatory. I don't know if Michael had anything to do with the decision, but it soured how I felt about the foundation.

The conversation I had with Michael for this podcast was my first discussion with him in ten years. I knew an archive of significant voices in Charlotte would not be complete without him. I asked through a friend at the foundation if Michael would be a guest. I was informed that he would. Here is what impressed me: his absolute humility and candor in answering questions that criticized him and the foundation. We talked on and off the record for two hours and again in a lengthy late-night phone call that he initiated, and I was taken by his transparency, his internal questioning, and his interest in my ideas and concerns. He modeled the very trait that he values most: intellectual honesty.

Intellectual honesty is inquiry in pursuit of the truth. It is a willingness to question one's own assumptions and acknowledge that reasonable alternative viewpoints exist. It

recognizes one's own weak points and notes the good points made by others. It addresses the merits of an argument instead of attacking the person making the argument. It is a commitment to critical thinking. It seeks to clarify and understand in service to the truth.

In talking with Michael, it became evident to me why, with the exception of Hugh McColl Jr., retired president and CEO of Bank of America, Michael Marsicano is the single most significant person in Charlotte's history over the last thirty years. His record is stunning. During his tenure at the Arts & Science Council (ASC) between 1989 and 1999, the united arts fund grew to lead the nation in per capita giving and became one of the largest endowed arts councils in the United States. Those monies flowed into major arts institutions, museums, and public art that fueled Charlotte's burgeoning cultural scene. Arguably his most significant accomplishment at ASC is how he navigated controversy over the Charlotte Repertory Theatre's production of *Angels in America*. His decisions helped preserve artistic expression in the city and public funding of the arts. It was a defining moment for our region and a story that Michael is destined to tell.

During his nearly twenty years leading the Foundation For The Carolinas, he has grown assets under management from several hundred million dollars to over \$2.5 billion. Under his leadership, the foundation has grown from the thirty-fifth largest community foundation to the sixth largest in the nation. The foundation has facilitated billions of dollars of grants to charitable organizations. However, the significance and impact of the foundation goes far beyond the numbers.

Here are just a few initiatives Michael has launched: the Luski-Gorelick Center for Philanthropy that helps nonprofit entities throughout the city do their work; the Robinson Center for Civic Leadership that convenes partners and funders to address the region's greatest needs; the A Way Home Endowment addressing the affordable housing crisis; the Critical Need Response Fund that helped sustain nonprofit organizations during the Great Recession; Project LIFT that is educating and empowering thousands of underserved students; the North Tryon Vision Plan that is catalyzing sixty acres of uptown Charlotte, the restoration of the long-derelict Carolina Theatre, and building a new iconic hotel tower that will grace the skyline; and the Opportunity Task Force and Leading on Opportunity Council addressing deeply embedded issues of economic disparity.

Any one of those accomplishments would be worthy of note. All of them constitute a towering achievement. The combination of them has strengthened our community beyond measure.

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