



# A FOUNDATION FOR CHANGE

*Jennifer Rainin is making a difference by mixing things up.*

WRITTEN BY  
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In the conservative world of conventional philanthropy, where money is given in expectation of staid and safe outcomes, Jennifer Rainin is striving to shake things up.

She has this startling idea, you see, that philanthropy is not about making or retaining money—it's about learning from your mistakes, as well as your successes, so you can make a big difference.

"Philanthropy is uniquely positioned to take risks and to take a creative approach because we're not beholden to our shareholders, so we don't have to prioritize making money," says Rainin, the CEO of the Kenneth Rainin Foundation, which was established by her father and launched with her at the helm upon his death in 2007. "It is incumbent on philanthropists to take smart risks. If it's a success, that's

good, but not being successful is not a failure, it's just more data; the real risk is *not* trying."

When Rainin is asked to give examples of risks that have resulted in failures as well as successes for the Kenneth Rainin Foundation, she doesn't hesitate to answer.

"Creativity is one of the core values of our organization," she says. "Some people, of course, would think that even answering this question is a risk, but creativity is seeing what is and what isn't and imagining what's possible for the sake of something bigger."

One "successful" project that the Rainin Foundation funded involved implementing a relationship-based professional development program called SEEDS of Learning in Oakland's transitional kindergartens and preschools.

"In 2014, Oakland's transitional kindergarten teachers didn't have the capacity to implement a proven literacy framework on their own," she says. "The Rainin Foundation provided funding to add a second adult—a trained SEEDS tutor—to each classroom, cutting the number of students per adult

in half. When we added another adult—a tutor trained in literacy—it made a significant difference in improving language and social-emotional skills in children.”

For the past eight years, the Rainin Foundation has awarded millions of dollars in grants to add trained literacy tutors to classrooms in Oakland. The so-called risk paid off: In 2022, California acknowledged the benefits of a 12:1 student-to-adult ratio in the classroom and instituted it as law.

Another Rainin Foundation grant-funded project, equally risky by traditional philanthropic standards, “didn’t work out as we had hoped,” she says.

Between 2015 and 2016, the foundation awarded grants of \$125,000 for “Block by Block,” part of a larger initiative of collaborative, interactive public-arts projects installed on San Francisco’s Market Street, an area that is a microcosm of stark inequality. The intention was to use public art to start building bridges across the economic extremes in the area by bringing people together in new ways.

“We saw that as new money was pouring into the area, the only seating in the neighborhood was private and inaccessible to many of the residents,” Rainin explains. “Marisha Farnsworth’s ‘Block by Block’ was an incredible sidewalk structure—people could sit or climb on it, and it had a swing. But it was taken over by a group that allegedly was selling drugs and playing music into the night. ‘Block by Block’ plunked tensions of race and class right into the heart of San Francisco’s polarizing economic boom. Other folks weren’t comfortable using it, and local businesses and nearby neighbors began complaining, so it was relocated. We worked with our partners to share our lesson in a blog post so others can learn from the experience, too.”

Rainin is quick to point out that she doesn’t label her foundation-funded projects as successes or failures and doesn’t tabulate and tally their financial impacts.

“I don’t think about winning and losing,” she says. “We are winning them all—those that don’t work out as we planned are a different kind of success.”



— Anne Lai, Ryan Coogler, and Rainin at the 2022 SFFILM awards night

Under Rainin’s leadership, the foundation has developed several major initiatives in its three funding areas—the arts, education, and health.

In the arts, Rainin focused on strengthening the filmmaking community by partnering with SFFILM to establish the SFFILM Rainin Grant, which has become the largest granting body for independent narrative feature films in the United States. Since 2009, more than 100 film projects have been supported, including Channing Godfrey Peoples’ *Miss Juneteenth*, Joe Talbot’s *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*, Boots Riley’s *Sorry to Bother You*, Chloé Zhao’s *Songs My Brothers Taught Me*, Ryan Coogler’s *Fruitvale Station*, and Benh Zeitlin’s *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

Rainin also helped create the Community Arts Stabilization Trust (CAST), an innovative real estate holding company in the San Francisco Bay Area that has received international recognition. The foundation seeded CAST with a \$5 million grant, and in 2017 awarded a \$3 million grant to support its expansion into Oakland and continued focus in San Francisco.

—  
Kenneth Rainin



The model has been adapted by several U.S. cities and in London to mitigate the displacement of arts and cultural organizations.

Rainin focused the foundation's work on early childhood education in Oakland, California, by supporting literacy development for children from birth through third grade and professional development for teachers and coaches working with these students.

In the health sector, the foundation's grants have supported high-risk, high-reward ideas that advance inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) research. The Rainin Foundation's annual Innovations Symposium brings together international researchers from disparate disciplines to inspire novel ideas and collaborations that further IBD research.

Rainin, who has had careers in acting, filmmaking, and education, got involved in philanthropy at an early age.

"My father started me gently," she says. "He did not do much philanthropy when I was a child because he was building his business, but by the time I was in my mid-teens and early twenties, he sat on the boards of schools and cultural organizations, and we talked about it a lot. By the time I was in my late twenties and early thirties, we did it together."

Their first major project—the establishment of the UCSF Colitis and Crohn's Disease Center—was also a personal one: Both father and daughter each suffered from ulcerative colitis.

"My father's core business was making medical research instruments, particularly pipettes, so he visited a lot of labs," Rainin remarks. "And we were both frustrated by the lack of treatment options for our disease. So with input from our doctor, we decided to establish a top-notch IBD research center in the Bay Area. The Rainin Foundation is now the fourth-largest funder in the world for IBD research."

Kenneth Rainin set up the foundation to focus on their personal passions—health, education, and the arts—and structured it so that the amounts of funding in the initial years gradually increased.

"I considered this my training wheels—it eased me into running the foundation," Rainin says, adding that in the first year, she was able to award about \$1 million in grants.

These days, the foundation grants around \$15 million annually.

In 2021, Rainin expanded her philanthropy by co-founding The Curve Foundation with her wife, *Curve* magazine founder Franco Stevens. The new foundation's mission is inspired by *Curve*, America's best-selling lesbian magazine.

"We want to lift up queer women's voices and tell their stories," she says.

To that end, in an initial program with NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists, the foundation created the Curve Award for Emerging Journalists, which focuses on telling LGBTQ+ women's stories.

Just as her father did with her, Rainin introduced her two sons—Dashiell, who is 22 years old, and Finneas, who is 20—to philanthropy when they were in their teens.

When they were 16 years old, they started attending and auditing the Rainin Foundation's board meetings as junior board members.

"That first year, I gave them each a small discretionary budget of \$1,000 to add to a grant we were awarding and asked them to tell why they chose it," she says. "When they were 17, they did an internship at the foundation and worked in every one of its departments. When they were 18, I asked them to write a research paper on a grantee and to tell the board what they learned about the organization, to detail the impact of the grant, and to make recommendations."

Her work has paid off. Dashiell, who like his mother and grandfather suffers from ulcerative colitis, is a full member of the board, a position he acquired after requesting it for two years in a row and making a personal presentation explaining how he would be an asset.

Rainin's philanthropic work has earned her a number of accolades. She has received the 2015 Outstanding Foundation Award from the Golden Gate Chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals, Inside Philanthropy's 2014 IPPY Award, and the Crohn's & Colitis Foundation's 2013 Champions of Hope Award.

Although Rainin spends most of her time running the foundation, she also produces media to increase the visibility of LGBTQ+ women and nonbinary people through Frankly Speaking Films, which she co-founded with fellow Rainin Foundation board member Rivkah Beth Medow in 2020.

Her executive producer credits include the documentaries *Jeannette*, about a survivor of the Pulse nightclub massacre; *Stage Left*, which details the history of theater in the Bay Area; *Two Spirits*, which focuses on gender identity in Native American cultures; and 2021's *Homeroom*, which examines Oakland's education system.

During her acting years, from 2006 to 2010, she appeared in *The Invited*, *We Have to Stop Now*, and *The Four Twenty-One*.

She made her directorial debut with *Ahead of the Curve* (2020), which chronicles the career of her wife, the pioneering LGBTQ+ activist who founded Curve magazine. Rainin also produced and co-directed *Holding Moses* (2022), the *New Yorker* documentary

and Oscar contender that focuses on parenting a disabled child.

Her filmmaking and producing pursuits find her on the other end of the grant-making process.

"I've been turned down for most of the grants I've applied for," she says. "As a grant seeker, I've gained a deeper appreciation for the time and energy that is needed to apply for grants. I want to implement a common application approach, which would make things simpler and more streamlined for grantors and grantees, not only in my foundation but in others as well. But it's been challenging to make this happen."

In all of her endeavors, Rainin is guided by her core values: service and gratitude.

"I'm very focused on the changes I want to make in the world," she says. "The Rainin Foundation, which is set up to run in perpetuity, is designed to honor my father's wishes. As much as it's his legacy, it's my legacy, too. I feel honored and deeply grateful to do this work and to be of service in the arts, education, and medical research communities."

Being involved with The Curve Foundation "gives me an opportunity to be of service in the LGBTQ+ community in the way my wife has been," she adds. "I have so much gratitude for the community that has welcomed me and created space where I can be myself and be of service."

Rainin's contributions have, by all accounts, paid off in numerous ways.

"While I know I've made a difference in the lives of grantees and stakeholders," she says, "I want to shift the way the field of philanthropy thinks about risk. That would be huge." **LM**