

Remarks by Gail Gerhart at the launch of the John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement. The American University in Cairo, March 6, 2006, Ewart Hall

Your Highness, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen: It's a great pleasure to be here with you today in Ewart Hall, with which I associate so many happy memories. And of course it is an honor to be here for the launching of this outstanding initiative that bears the name of John Gerhart, and embodies so much of the spirit and substance of things for which he stood. Many people here today knew John; but others never met him, or perhaps saw him only on one or two ceremonial occasions. So it seems appropriate for me to say a few things about him, and in particular to try to explain his interest in philanthropy and civic engagement.

There's an old adage that says "charity begins at home." Usually it's taken to mean that before you extend your generosity to people far away, you should look around to see who needs help in your immediate surroundings. But on another level, it can also refer to child-rearing and to the values that parents impart to children as they grow up.

John grew up in a tightly knit community of unusually generous people. His father, who was the minister of a church, never had a big salary, and he relied on an invisible network of members of the congregation to pay many of the family's bills. John once remarked to me that it wasn't until he got to university that he realised that people actually had to pay for things like telephone service or to have dentists fix their teeth.

At home in Abilene, Texas, members of the church knew better than to give cash to John's father, Willis Gerhart. In the blink of an eye Willis would have turned around and given the money to somebody who, in his opinion, needed it more. In 10th grade, John came home from boarding school to find that his dad had given away his prized stamp collection — to some child who, in his opinion, "needed it more."

For John, the community's generosity led to opportunities to broaden his own horizons. In high school, a woman in the congregation paid for him to attend an academically rigorous private school several hundred miles away from home. The school stressed the same religious values of service and sharing, and also awakened John's interest in social justice. It was the late 1950s, and the Bishop of Texas was taking a lead in promoting racial integration in a region which at that time was strongly resistant to principles of social equality.

Later, as a university student, John took a life-changing sociology course on the subject of race in America. In the course, he researched and wrote a term paper on the role played by the Episcopal

church in school integration in Texas. In later years he sometimes reflected on the excitement of writing that paper, which had so profoundly brought together his academic life and his “real” life of growing up in America’s segregated south.

Once he began to explore the world beyond West Texas, John developed a passionate curiosity about other societies. The year he turned 18, he spent the summer at a work-camp in Japan, a country that had been at war with the United States only 16 years earlier. The following summer, he worked as a volunteer in a youth club in the slums of Liverpool. The year after that, he took a year off from university to be a volunteer teacher in Tanzania.

By then, at age 20, his personality and character were fully formed — his friendly and gregarious nature, his intellectual curiosity, his strong leadership qualities, and his fundamental commitments to social justice and service for the benefit of wider communities. But his “career goals” were still wide open: like so many students at that age, he wanted to have an “interesting” and “meaningful” life in which his talents would be well-utilized. But doing *what*? He used to joke that he dreamed of being a rock-and-roll singer, but lacked the talent for it. A business career didn’t appeal to him. He didn’t have the patience for a scholarly life.

So it was mostly good luck when at age 25, a graduate school professor in 1968 recommended him for a summer internship with a major American philanthropic organization, the Ford Foundation. He was subsequently hired by Ford, where he worked for 29 years, becoming a jack-of-all trades in the foundation’s international division.

From being the fortunate recipient of the generosity of others in his early life, he became a professional donor, making grants around the world to promote economic and social development, to improve educational opportunities, raise health standards, and foster greater equality in societies with legacies of gender, ethnic and class discrimination.

It was while engaged in these pursuits that he came to grasp the importance of promoting what now is sometimes called “indigenous” (or local) philanthropy. This refers to a situation in which “outside” donors may be able to assist local or regional “indigenous” philanthropists to adopt new ways of mobilizing wealth for more effective social betterment.

Just as the United States in recent years has seen the growth of community foundations in dozens of towns and cities, so too has the promotion of local philanthropy become “an idea whose time has come” in forward-looking societies around the world. Philanthropy of course is not new — what is new is the belief that philanthropy itself can develop and become more effective. John saw the potential for this kind of progressive innovation in Egypt, and with others, he helped to lay the

groundwork for what is now becoming the very exciting initiative we are launching here today at AUC.

Some years ago, John and I attended a landmark event, our 25th college reunion. One of our former classmates made a big point of congratulating John by saying: “You are the person who’s done what all of us wanted to do: save the world!” John didn’t say anything, but later he laughed and said to me, “I never had any intention of trying to save the world. I just wanted to do something interesting with my life.”

I can certainly vouch that John was not an idealist in the usual sense. I can even confess that I sometimes experienced some momentary irritation at his sheer down-to-earth pragmatism. There *were* particular causes he was passionate about — gun control in the United States was one of them. But for most of his life, he saw the work that he did simply as a responsibility, a duty — never a crusade.

During the years he spent as a professional donor, he loved his work because it was intellectually challenging and it brought out the best of his talents and training. And, of course, it was grounded in the values that he had absorbed in his early life — generosity, sharing, fairness and service to others — values so built into his character that they were simply second nature.

So it seems right in every way that the Center we are inaugurating today should bear his name. He was proud of Egypt’s role as a leader in the Arab world, and he believed Egypt to be a country of infinite possibilities. He believed in AUC’s mission as an Egyptian university, and in the potential of AUC students to shape and contribute to the future of Egypt, far out of proportion to their numbers.

From his own life as a student, he knew that meaningful learning and exciting energy can be generated when good teachers help students connect their academic training with the problems and issues that loom large in their societies. He wanted as many AUC students as possible to experience the rewards of civic engagement, in the belief that many would be inspired to continue that commitment in later life.

With the support of people here today, and with the outstanding leadership of Professor Barbara Ibrahim and her staff, I know that this initiative is going to bear wonderful fruit — for AUC, for Egypt, and for the entire region of the Middle East. Thank you.