It was love at first sight.

Nancy Jones was happily running the Community Foundation of Abilene, where she was the founding president and built it from an initial base of $750,000 to $80 million in endowed assets.

But she was also a nationally known leader and consultant in the development of community foundations across the United States. So it was not surprising when a search firm for the board of the North Texas Community Foundation called her during a national search to succeed Homer M. Dowd, president of the foundation from 1992 to 2009. Dowd died in 2015 at age 85. The North Texas Community Foundation is based in Fort Worth but serves an 11-county region in North Texas.

Jones knew Dowd and was familiar with the Fort Worth operation, but she wasn’t interested in moving. “I had been asked many times to move from Abilene but I had married again and I married a great Texan who has a ranch out there and we weren’t interested in moving,” she said.

She offered to consult, however, and asked the representative of the search firm to pass on a message to the board in Fort Worth: there were many more things a community foundation could be doing and she was willing to help board members see that.

“After I came up here and visited with them, I fell in love and they fell in love, and that was great except my husband didn’t want to move.” But the Joneses worked that out. She was hired in November 2008, just as the stock market was crashing. When she got to Fort Worth in March 2009, the foundation’s assets had declined from $130 million to $90 million.

“Yet I recognized that Fort Worth is probably the epicenter of where you could really build a great community foundation because people understood philanthropy, they understood foundations, there was wealth, and there was need,” Jones said. “I could see all of that.”

So could the board of directors.

“When the board did a search for the new CEO, the goal was to find a leader who would ‘up the game’ of the foundation,” said Jim DeMoss, a board mem-
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Her mother was a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in far northern Canada. After the war they moved to Fairbanks. Both are now deceased.

When Jones was 9, the family “did a Grapes of Wrath” type of trip south to San Diego because her father, who was then a carpenter, figured out that he could work year round in a warmer climate.

She’s the first in her family to graduate from college, with a full scholarship to the University of Southern California, where she earned master’s and bachelor’s degrees in economics. “My freshman year all I could remember is that every time the bells would ring I’d nearly fall on my knees; I was just so thrilled to be in college,” Jones said.

She earned a doctorate in business administration from the University of Kentucky at Lexington, where she attended also on a full fellowship and was the first female doctoral student in the College of Business. Following that she went back to San Diego, where she became the first female on the business faculty at San Diego State University.

Then she married a Texan and the oil patch drew them to Abilene. The marriage lasted three years and she thought she’d head back to California to “pick up my life.” But she was hooked on Abilene and Texas.

“I was entranced by a small town because I’d always lived in big places and I was amazed by the fact that you could be in a supermarket and recognize somebody else or see what civicly was happening,” Jones said.

And then she was approached about starting a community foundation.

“I had no clue,” she says, “but was excited about the concept.” She ran that foundation for 22 years and also began consulting with other community foundations. “I began to develop a national understanding of how community foundations worked, and how they fit inside a community, and how they looked differently each time. I have a really short attention span and yet I’m still enthralled by community foundations,” she said.

Changing Course

Nancy Jones didn’t set out to be a community foundation leader. She was born in Fairbanks, Alaska, to a Canadian-born mom and an Ohio-born father who met when he was stationed in Dawson Creek to build the Alaskan Highway during World War II. Her mother was a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in far northern Canada. After the war they moved to Fairbanks. Both are now deceased.

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North Texas Community Foundation

**Mission:** To serve philanthropists and enhance the well-being of North Texas, while leading productive change for our community now and the future.

The North Texas Community Foundation is a permanent collection of charitable funds supported by donors. For 35 years, the community foundation has promoted responsible charitable giving in order to build a better community. The foundation serves an 11-county region – Tarrant, Young, Jack, Wise, Denton, Parker, Hood, Johnson, Somervell, Bosque and Hill counties – representing fund holders from around the country. The one thing that the funders all have in common is a love for North Texas and a heart to give, charitably to ensure its success as a living asset for our community now and the future.

With assets of more than $250 million, the foundation is in the top 10 percent of the 750 community foundations nationwide. In 2016, the community foundation ranked No. 1 for donor satisfaction among community foundations surveyed by The Center for Effective Philanthropy.

**Community Impact Programs**

The Toolbox Grants program provides nonprofit organizations with the resources they need to improve their strength and stability. It runs on a three-year cycle, with each sequence addressing a designated area of need for the community.

- **Year Started:** 2010
- **Total Charitable Impact since inception:** $21 million
- **Total Charitable Impact in 2018:** $306,336

**WORTH: The Next Generation of Philanthropists**

WORTH: The Next Generation of Philanthropists is a program targeted towards engaging up and coming leaders in community philanthropy. WORTH members have the opportunity to learn about community needs in Tarrant County and think strategically about what effective, sustainable philanthropy will look like for future generations.

- **Year Started:** 2015
- **Total Charitable Impact since inception:** $25,000

**The Early Learning Alliance**

The Early Learning Alliance is a community collaboration of more than 50 individuals and organizations focused on early learning from ages 0-8. Together, it seeks to improve outcomes for all Fort Worth children by aligning the goals of early child care providers and K-12 systems. The network is hosted by Fort Worth ISD, receives technical assistance from the National League of Cities, and is supported by the North Texas Community Foundation, among others.

**The Friends of the Community Foundation**

The Friends of the Community Foundation is a program aimed at covering key groups in our community, developing community knowledge and insights into effective nonprofit organizations, helping to advocate for effective collaboration, and developing community-wide initiatives such as the Early Learning Alliance and Toolbox Grants.

**The Insights programs**

The Insights programs are a series of educational conversations that provide insight on philanthropy from each perspective in the charitable giving process – the donor, the nonprofit, and the professional advisor who provides guidance on wealth management. Held annually, insights features a total of six programs.

Source: North Texas CF and the Center for Effective Philanthropy

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enjoy the oversight and accountability of a volunteer board and professional staff.”

Within a community foundation, there are different types of funds. One is a “donor-advised” fund, where someone wants to put aside money for charity and receive a tax reduction, but wants to be able to advise the foundation on where the money could be used. Generally, those are donations given out to depletion over time. “Donor-advised funds are used all across the country and they’re a mechanism to be able to help people give charitably but not hurriedly,” Jones said.

North Texas Community Foundation was primarily advised funds when Jones took charge. “What we basically had to do was un-brand the community foundation and re-brand it because it was seen as a do-nor-advised vehicle that literally had no stake in what the community was all about,” Jones said. “A real community foundation is so different than that; changing that perception is really what occupied us for the first few years.”

But there are other ways to give. Donations can be made to benefit special interests as broad as “children” or as narrow as specific charities. Or donations can be endowed, meaning that they exist in perpetuity with either specific restrictions or no restrictions about how the income from growth can be used. In many cases, donors delegate to the foundation’s board of directors how grants are made within the restrictions.

“We have one gentleman who said, ‘I don’t care what it is, I just want great programs that help children and I’m especially interested in children that have been abused or have had difficult circumstances,’ ” Jones said.

Donor-advised funds are a terrific tool, she said. “We want people to be interested in philanthropy and do great things, but there’s another part, and that is, how about at the end of your life what are you giving for the future of Fort Worth? That whole pipeline of new charitable dollars that are going to come into Fort Worth has never been established until the last few years. What we now have is about $310 million that we know is going to come into the community foundation for all different purposes and will be permanent.”

Board treasurer Michael Appleman, managing partner at Cantey Hanger law firm and a former chairman of the firm’s Business, Tax and Estates Section, believes the growth at the community foundation is due to the community’s recognition of the foundation as a trusted partner in philanthropic issues.

“But I would say that the recognition is the result of some hard work – especially by the community foundation staff – to grow the organization from being more of just a number of donor-advised funds to being a philanthropic resource for organizations and donors alike,” Appleman said.

“[Jones] sees the big picture and she recognizes talent, hires that talent and then trusts them to do the jobs they were brought in to do, providing them with guidance and feedback without micromanaging,” Appleman.

**CHANGE AGENT**

Since moving to the North Texas Community Foundation, Jones has initiated a number of significant changes. Among them:

- **Established “ToolBox Grants,”** an annual grant cycle to strengthen nonprofits’ capacity to serve efficiently. More than $1.8 million has been awarded to Tarrant County charities. Notably, ToolBox Grants are emphasizing agencies involved in early learning – affecting children between birth and 8 years old – and are a major part of the support for the 100x25 initiative, an effort to have all third graders in the Fort Worth Independent School District reading at grade level by 2025.

- **Created WORTH: The Next...**
Generation of Philanthropists, a program to involve younger people in savvy charitable giving. In its inaugural year, WORTH participants awarded $25,000 to groups working against child abuse.

- Established the Professional Advisor Outreach Committee (PAOC), a regional network of professionals with expertise in tax law, estate planning, accounting, wealth management and financial planning.
- Established The Tarrant County Private Foundation Group, which regularly convenes the leadership of area foundations to share information on local philanthropy efforts.

Jones didn’t want to call the grant program “Toolbox.” “I wanted to call them ‘crowbar grants,’ but nobody liked it. I envisioned them as a lever,” she said. “It’s a sustainable program to build infrastructure and it started in 2010 when all the nonprofits were eating themselves from the inside; they were putting programs out and they didn’t even have enough money to support their infrastructure. One way for the community foundation to get started, as I got started here, was to work to assist them in building back their infrastructure.”

Four years ago, the foundation decided another place it could have a leveraging effect was in early learning. “With the help and support of local private foundations, we put together grant programs and these agencies would apply,” Jones said. “This is our third year and we’ll give more than $1 million out helping these agencies grow their capacity to help our very youngest citizens be prepared for kindergarten.”

The same day she was meeting with the board to get final approval for the Toolbox program, the League of Cities announced that it was going to invest in technical support for early learning in the Fort Worth ISD.

“My vision was to give a group of very, very dedicated agencies to work together to build a system out of a non-system. That is now called the Early Learning Alliance.” Now, she says, many different nonprofits and governmental agencies are working together “at the beginning of what I call collective action.”

“We’re supporting it because we’ve been in on that and we’ll keep on in that area, and we’ll also be their fiscal agent. In other words, if money’s coming in and they need a place to put it we’ll be a fiscal agent for that whole effort, which is I think an important aspect of what we do,” Jones said. “If, for example, AT&T wants to give $10,000 and they need a receptacle, we’re going to put it here.”

As generations die off and leadership in North Texas changes, some fear that the rising young leaders may not have the same commitment that those who came before them had. That’s the thrust of the WORTH program.

“It’s imperative that we teach the next generation of donors about savvy giving,” Jones said. “We hope WORTH will inspire young professionals to leave a legacy, do good, and think beyond.”

There’s a $250 annual membership contribution to the WORTH Endowment Fund, matched dollar for dollar up to $50,000 by private investors. In the 2015-16 grant cycle, WORTH members granted CASA of Tarrant County $15,000 to buy web-based tablets and software to help staff and volunteers serve children in foster care more effectively. First3Years received $10,000 for a pilot program to address the needs of maltreated infants and toddlers through support of a co-parenting alliance between birth and foster families.

The Tarrant County Private Foundation Group that Jones started when she got to Fort Worth holds a quarterly meeting. “It’s nothing more than exchange of information,” she said. “We’ll talk about what we’re doing and we’ll have various information about investments, et cetera. That group has grown and it’s also become a training ground for new foundations that are coming up and get a new executive director; they’ve got a group of people to learn from. Before that there was never anything like that.”

INTO THE FUTURE

The programs mentioned above and other changes that Jones has made and is making speak to the future of the community foundation, its leaders say. “The future of the foundation looks very bright at this time. Nancy has set a course that will carry us into the coming decades with larger assets and greater effectiveness,” said DeMoss, the board chairman.

The organization Jones found when she arrived in Fort Worth did not meet her vision, he said. “She has dramatically increased the capacity of the staff to meet future challenges. The foundation is a completely different organization with a completely different vision than the one Nancy Jones hired on to.”
It’s an ongoing process, but it’s always good to know what “success” means.

“I would define success as reaching the time when the North Texas Community Foundation is looked to as an entity that can help lead in efforts to meet the challenges that face the communities of North Texas by bringing not only financial assets but, more importantly, leadership assets,” DeMoss said.

Fort Worth has been blessed that many of its first families were determined to pass on some of their wealth to future generations of Fort Worth residents to come. But there are only a few of those families. A community foundation is different.

“It’s not one family. It’s about 260 families,” Jones said, “Hope-fully, in another 10 years it’s going to be 600 families. They all have different interests just as a family would have an interest, like the [Sid] Richardson family has in education. We might have another one that is only about abused children or about art. By having multiple fund holders, you get so much more diversity in terms of interest, passion, thought, et cetera.”

Appleman also see a bright future for the foundation. “The vision and goals for the organization, which the staff is working to achieve, are such that the organization should be a significant factor in accomplishing the community’s philanthropic goals,” he said.

“Nancy is an excellent CEO. She researches issues very diligently before she takes a decision. Her experience as a business professor and CEO of the Abilene Community Foundation give her a great background for her current challenges,” said DeMoss. “Nancy is very bright and she has good people skills. She seems to be able to meet new people easily.”

That’s good, because it really does take a village.

OFF-DUTY

Remember that Jones said that her husband, Ross, wasn’t especially interested in leaving Abilene. But they worked it out. Ross Jones is an attorney and a former district attorney in Coleman County. He also works with a title company there.

The town of Coleman was established in 1876 and incorporated in 1892, and it had about 4,700 residents in the 2010 census. It’s about 50 miles southeast of Abilene and a little more than two hours by car from Fort Worth.

“He comes up here half the time and I go down there on the weekends,” Jones said. She never had children, but Ross Jones has two sons and a daughter by a previous marriage. “Being out at the ranch all the time, I bird-watch constantly. We go on trips and bird-watch. I do a lot of that. Basically that and hanging out with the grandkids. I’m kind of dull,” Jones said.

Jones was named a Great Woman of Texas this year by the Fort Worth Business Press, and in the questionnaire associated with that award, she shared some other insights with us. (Some of the comments were published in the Oct. 31-Nov. 6, 2016, edition of the Fort Worth Business Press.)

“I love to fly-fish. My husband, Ross, and I try to find wilderness areas near the Yukon territories in Northern Canada to fish and to enjoy the outdoors,” Jones said. “Also, I love Western music – not Country-Western, but Western artists such as Ian Tyson and Don Edwards. Ask me about songs such as ‘I Outgrew the Wagon’ and ‘Summer Wages.’ ”

She says her mother was the most significant role model or mentor in her life. “She was a pioneer – literally. Her family homesteaded the northern Canadian prairies as wheat farmers in the 1920s,” Jones said. “She lived in a sod-roof house until she was 16. I would like to think I have inherited some of her persistence, love of learning and sense of humor.”

Don’t think there is much doubt about that.