



Philanthropy Southeast's

Inspiration

Fall 2025

Where Philanthropy Begins

Bold Action in the Big Easy

Your look-ahead at this year's Annual Meeting | Page 7

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

Rays of a Setting Sun

The Ray C. Anderson Foundation is winding down with a big push on climate change | Page 3

Delivering Data

How The Christy-Houston Foundation is helping its grantees benefit from the power of data science | Page 9



On The Ray, pilot energy projects explore ways to generate alternative power on underutilized roadside land, demonstrating how transportation corridors can deliver additional value to the public. (Photo courtesy of The Ray C. Anderson Foundation)

Climate Countdown

Sensing urgency, the Ray C. Anderson Foundation aims to accelerate impact by sunseting by 2030

By Scott Westcott

Back in 1994, a group of California-based customers considering doing business with commercial flooring company Interface, Inc. asked founder and CEO Ray C. Anderson to describe Interface's environmental mission.

At the time it was a rare question for a manufacturer operating out of the Southeast – and, frankly, one Anderson hadn't thought much about previously. Sensing this, a consultant representing the California group confronted Anderson directly stating: "You just don't get it."

Yet rather than dismiss the comment as West Coast "woo-woo," Anderson took the accusation seriously enough to assemble an internal task force. Then an employee left a book on his desk, *The Ecology of Commerce*, that would prove life-changing – and play a key role in launching a corporate environmental movement.

"He read it straight through in one night, moved to tears," recalls his grandson, John Lanier, who currently serves as executive director of the family foundation. "It was Ray's environmental epiphany – what he called his spear in the chest – convincing him that business and industry, while causing environmental harm, must also lead in solving these problems. This serendipitous event led him to become the first CEO of a publicly traded company to advocate for environmental sustainability."

Anderson would devote the next 17 years of his life to incorporating environmental best practices into his business and serving as a leading advocate for corporate social responsibility. In the 1990s he also had the forethought to create a small foundation that he hoped would grow upon his passing; it was a precursor to the Ray C. Anderson Foundation that we know today.

Multiple generations of the Anderson family have been involved in guiding the foundation's work in the years since, consistently funding work targeted in four focus areas of sustainable business, supporting startup companies developing nature-inspired products and services, creating a sustainable highway system, and scaling the most applicable climate solutions in Georgia.

Yet recently, after much discussion, debate and soul-searching, the foundation made the decision to spend down all its assets and sunset the organization over the next five years. The aim: To make as much impact as possible at a time in which climate change poses an existential threat and government resources and will dwindle.

Philanthropy Southeast recently connected with Lanier to gain more insight into the decision:

PSE: What led up to the decision for the foundation to sunset?

Lanier: In the summer of 2023, the foundation reached a point that arrives for all family foundations where the younger generation expresses a desire for a greater voice and role beyond their "kids' table" philanthropic efforts. This led to an 18-month strategic planning process. During this process, we realized we needed to make fundamental decisions across three toggles: perpetuity – or how long the foundation would exist – where the money would go, and who would decide where it goes.

PSE: What were the key factors driving this decision?

Lanier: A key driver was the realization that as environmental and climate funders, we could not "tighten our belts." Given the urgency of the climate crisis, particularly the scientific consensus that the 2020s are the decade of action, it felt irresponsible to hold onto money until 2050 if climate goals were not met. This

conviction led to a unanimous decision to put the foundation out of business by the end of 2030.

PSE: Were there reservations or dissent within the family regarding the decision to sunset?

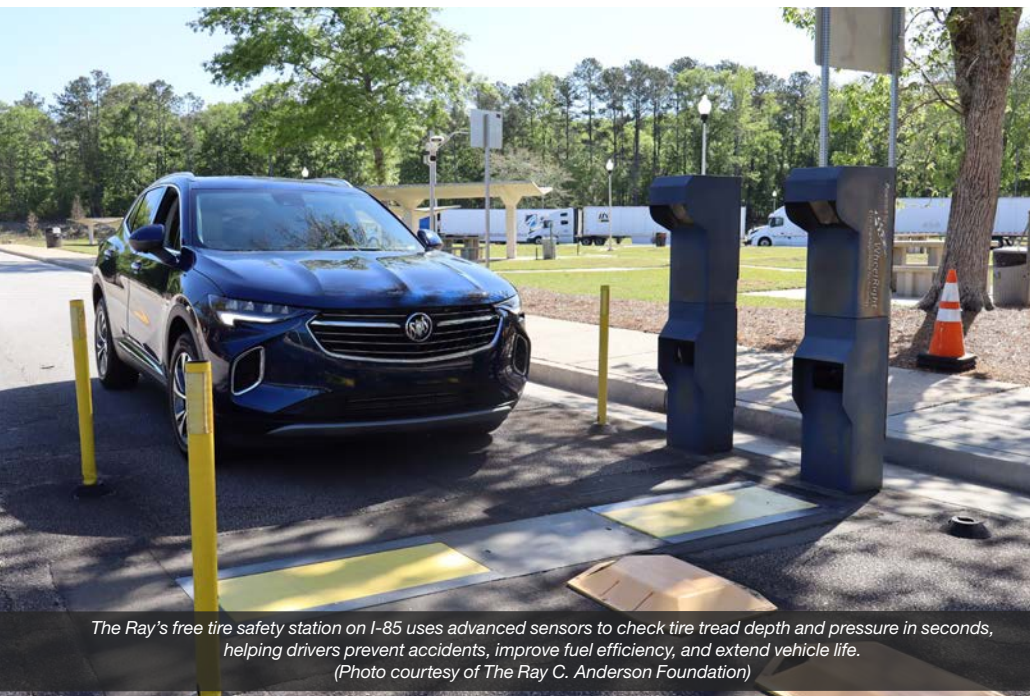
Lanier: While the rest of 2024 involved hard but rewarding conversations about the two toggles of where funds would go and who would make those calls, the decision to sunset itself was unwavering. There was no dissent, and everyone understood it was the right path. This unity was rooted in the motivation of Ray Anderson's legacy and a poem written in 1996 by Glenn Thomas, an Interface associate. The poem, entitled "Tomorrow's Child," emphasizes giving thought to future generations and the world they will inherit.

PSE: How has the current political climate, particularly regarding climate initiatives, impacted the foundation's decision-making?

Lanier: The decision to sunset was made before the November 2024 election and was not driven by political dynamics. However, the current political climate has made the announcement more meaningful. Climate work, and nonprofit work in general, is harder now due to political decisions that have led to the cancellation or questioning of federal funds. Philanthropy must lean in and meet this moment by supporting grantees and understanding that things are not normal.

PSE: How is the foundation addressing the challenge of promoting climate action in a politically polarized region like the Southeast?

Lanier: From a philanthropic perspective, we emphasize that climate change connects to virtually every other philanthropic cause. Instead of asking funders to abandon their current focus, we suggest they connect the dots between existing issues and climate. For example, racial equity and climate are linked because extreme heat disproportionately affects



disadvantaged communities, which often break down along racial lines.

We also highlight resilience which is less politically charged than the phrase climate change. Events like Hurricane Helene have made communities realize the need to be prepared for and bounce back faster from extreme weather. By layering a climate lens onto existing place-based giving, funders can multiply their impacts where solutions intersect, benefiting both their communities and the climate.

PSE: What is the foundation's message to other funders regarding climate initiatives?

Lanier: To other climate funders, the message is "come into the Southeast." Leading on climate in this region holds significant weight for the rest of the country. To funders who haven't traditionally supported environmental or climate causes, the message is that they are already climate funders with the smallest tweak to their existing work. By looking 25 years ahead, it's clear that climate will be the most critical issue for communities in the Southeast. Addressing climate can create jobs, advance equity, protect the natural environment, and improve human health.

PSE: What are your plans for any remaining foundation funds in 2030?

Lanier: Between now and 2030, we are committed to focus on setting up our key grantees for a future without us, empowering next generation leadership on the board, and making one final contribution to our philanthropic legacy, by inspiring and helping other funders in the Southeast to prioritize climate issues.

We have some ideas around what that will be. It'd be premature to say exactly what that will be, but the idea is we want our swan song, the last contribution that the Ray C. Anderson Foundation makes to the environmental movement, to be meaningful and very harmonious with our decision to sunset. We want to inspire and help others in the giving community to see climate as their issue. There is not enough climate philanthropy in the Southeast by the Southeast. Most of the climate philanthropy that is coming into the Southeast is from national funders, who don't have a full understanding of the cultural nuances, and the specific needs of our communities.

PSE: What do you hope your sundown decision conveys to the broader field of philanthropy?

Lanier: One of the things that philanthropy has always done from the very beginning is to look backwards. What would our founder think of this? What would our founder say? What does our governing document ask of us? I think it is time to stop asking what our founders would've thought, what our original purpose and intent was as a sector. Instead, philanthropy needs to ask, what will the 10-year-olds of today think of us when they're 35 in the year 2050 – which in climate terms is the year we'll know if we got it right or wrong. What will they say then about what our foundation did, what philanthropy did? So I would hold this up to philanthropy: Don't ask what the past has to say about your work. Ask what the future will have to say about your work. ■



The Ray C. Anderson Foundation's John Lanier speaks at the 2025 Family Foundations Forum. (Photo credit: Danielle Miles)

A Legacy of Environmental Philanthropy

The legacy of the Ray C. Anderson Foundation began nearly 14 years ago, after Ray Anderson bestowed approximately \$50 million of his estate to the foundation. Since 2012, the foundation has awarded more than \$36 million in grants, primarily focused on:

Sustainable business through the **Ray C. Anderson Center for Sustainable Business at Georgia Tech**.



Funding the research and providing staff support for **Drawdown Georgia**, a statewide movement to accelerate progress toward net zero greenhouse gas emissions in Georgia.



Seeding and scaling the growth of nature-inspired startups through the **Ray of Hope Accelerator**, an initiative of the Biomimicry Institute.



Funding for **The Ray**, a living laboratory and resource to more than 30 state departments of transportation and 55 strategic partnerships across the country for research and innovation related to sustainable highways.

Photo credits (clockwise from top): Georgia Tech University, Drawdown Georgia, The Ray C. Anderson Foundation, ReefCycle.

Welcoming Our New Members

The following organizations have joined or reconnected with Philanthropy Southeast since our previous issue. Look for them at our events and programs – and give them a warm welcome!

The **Bissell Ballantyne Legacy Foundation** is a family foundation based in Charlotte, where its giving is focused on health, human services and education. Whitney Feld is the foundation's president.

The **Leon Levine Foundation**, also a family foundation based in Charlotte, focuses its work on supporting health, human services, education and Jewish values in North and South Carolina. Tom Lawrence is the president and CEO.

The **Jefferson Community Foundation**, based in Metairie, Louisiana, directs its giving toward a variety of areas in Jefferson Parish. Christine Briede is executive director.

These members recently reconnected with Philanthropy Southeast:

- **Stephen L. Cornwell Foundation**
- **The Jolley Foundation**
- **Coweta Community Foundation**
- **Kaiser Permanente**