



Ardor and Diligence: Harold Alfond, Greg Powell, and the Children of Maine

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Location: Portland (https://www.themainemag.com/location/portland/)
People: Greg Powell (https://www.themainemag.com/maine-people/greg-powell/)

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By Sarah Braunstein
Photographs by Trent Bell

The story of a self-made man, his determined predecessor, and how a groundbreaking philanthropic foundation is bettering the state of Maine—and putting cash in the cradle of every new baby.

The Bottom Line

This is a story about big ideas and big money.

Is that gauche, mentioning money? In the first line? Maybe so, but it's a critical part of this tale, and to pretend otherwise would be disingenuous. This is a story about people with great wealth who use it responsibly, generously, and for the greater good. It's also about a major epidemic plaguing our country and state: education inequality.

The Rise of Harold Alfond

If you're not familiar with Harold Alfond, here's what you need to know:

Born in 1914, Alfond grew up during the lean years of the Depression, a smart kid, a good athlete, a boy who loved baseball, hockey, and football. After graduating from high school, he worked in shoe manufacturing in Kennebunk. In 1940, he and his father purchased an abandoned shoe factory in Norridgewock (price: $1,000—a sum raised by selling Harold's car). The Norrwock Shoe Company thrived, and even after Alfond sold the company in 1944 (for $1.1 million—$14 million today), he stayed on as president for another 25 years. At a mere 36 years old, he and his wife Bibby began Maine's first private charitable foundation.

In 1956, Senator Margaret Chase Smith and Owen Brewster, a former Maine governor and United States senator, saw the need for a revival of Dexter (Brewster's hometown), and they approached Alfond. Two years later, Alfond converted a vacant woolen mill into the Dexter Shoe Company. The impact was enormous: at the height of its success, Dexter employed 4,000 people, manufactured 7.5 million pairs of shoes a year, and amassed annual sales exceeding $250 million. In 1993, Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway purchased the company. Alfond, then 79, continued to manage the business until 2001, when Dexter merged with the H. H. Brown shoe company.

But that's not the half of it. Alfond used his personal wealth to fund an astonishing array of programs: secondary schools, public and private colleges and universities, athletic facilities, playing fields, community buildings, and healthcare centers.

When Alfond died in 2007, he was still hard at work on two major projects: MaineGeneral Hospital's Harold Alfond Center for Cancer Care and the Harold Alfond College Challenge. When Alfond promised he wouldn't "retire until at least ten years

after I'm dead," he clearly meant it.

Meet Greg Powell

Let's go back once more. This time to the 1950s. Before Harold Alfond's success, before the foundation that bears his name, Greg Powell was a young boy in Waterville.

Unlike Alfond, Powell wasn't an excellent athlete ("too tall and skinny"), but he loved going to games. The Powell and Alfond families were close friends, and they cheered together at baseball and hockey games. The kids played, and the fathers shared a special bond. Powell grew up admiring Alfond. Powell left Maine briefly to attend Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, where he was a political science major. As president of the debate team, he traveled the country. To the disappointment of his father (a dentist) and his grandfather (a country doctor), the younger Powell was lured by the siren song of the courtroom.

Powell is clearly the furthest thing from a mercenary attorney, and it's hard to imagine him as a cutthroat college debater. He is soft-spoken and deeply polite, and he exudes an air of compassion and curiosity. He was, one imagines, the kind of star debater whose forcefulness relied on rational, impeccably organized arguments rather than intimidating aggression. Think Atticus Finch of To Kill a Mockingbird. (In fact, there's a strong resemblance between Powell and Gregory Peck, who played Finch in the film version—same dark hair, lanky height, and erudition.)

In 1977, Powell attended the University of Maine School of Law, followed by a clerkship for Maine Supreme Court Justice Ed Godfrey, who helped Powell sharpen his legal writing and analytical skills. Then came several years of trial practice at Pierce Atwood and the boutique litigation firm Friedman and Babcock.

Law is the engine that gets Powell going, and he speaks with reverence about the profession and Maine's legal community. "It's a funny thing about Maine," he says. "If you're going to be a trial lawyer, Maine isn't a big enough place where you'd specialize, so you get exposed to so much. You get to learn about something you may never know about, become a master, work with witnesses who are experts in the area, and solve the problem of the case. And then move on to something else. I love the intellectualism of the pursuit, the theater."

No doubt it's Powell's broad-mindedness—and his endearing capacity to wax rhapsodic—that led Harold Alfond, in 1995, to offer him a job. "What would you think about starting a company to manage my wealth and philanthropy?" Alfond said.

Powell was genuinely taken aback. “Why me?”

“Well, tell me what you do,” Alfond replied.

So Powell told him. He spoke about his love of law, learning, philosophy, and of sponging up the knowledge of experts. Of solving problems, asking the right questions, and swaying juries. Alfond’s response was immediate and to the point: “Perfect.” So the two got to work.

Bookends

Powell’s office in Portland’s Monument

Square is a cheerful, modest space. The walls are decorated with graphs, pie charts, and photographs of families—Powell’s, Alfond’s, and those the foundation has supported over the years. In the conference room, enclosed in glass, hangs a baseball bat signed by Ted Williams and a photograph of the slugger shaking Babe Ruth’s hand. Letters from grant recipients adorn the walls, alongside plaques and medals celebrating Alfond’s accomplishments.

Wearing a suit and tie, sipping his coffee meditatively, Powell describes the way the foundation works.

“One of the things we try to do here is support bipartisan efforts—we try to bring different constituencies together to achieve common goals. There are many, many organizations and people committed to good causes here. What we see when we look at Maine is a huge amount of heart, a huge amount of talent, but not enough teamwork. In a state without great financial wealth, the notion of bringing organizations together to accomplish goals they couldn’t accomplish on their own is very important. Mr. Alfond was a fan of athletics, and saw in athletics competition as well as the value of people working together. We apply that principle in philanthropy.”

Today, the foundation is applying that philanthropic principle to education. Powell and the board lament that only 30 to 40 percent of the United States population—and even fewer Mainers—receive the benefits of higher education. The education deficit is growing increasingly evident and consequential now that developing nations are making the global economy far more complex and competitive. It rankles Powell that the self-awareness, confidence, and personal growth one gains from education—and the exposure to classical philosophy, great art, and literature—has been limited to so few, particularly in Maine.

“Higher education must reach the vast population that hasn’t had its benefit,” Powell says. “For too many young people and their parents, higher education is complicated, formidable, and frightening.”

In the last summer of his life, Alfond and Powell discussed the subject at length, and right before his death Alfond made a big decision—a decision that became the Harold Alfond College Challenge.

Startling in its simplicity and enormous generosity, the College Challenge gives $500 to every baby born in Maine. Every one. All parents need to do is open a free 529 account—a tax-advantaged plan designed to encourage saving for college—and their baby receives a $500 grant. The hope is that parents will continue investing in the account, watch it grow, and begin planning for their child’s collegiate education as soon as possible.

At present, 40 percent of Maine families with newborns are enrolled in the program, but the foundation is committed to achieving 100 percent participation in coming years.

On an office bulletin board is a collection of handwritten notes from parents to their newborns:

Isaac,

Dream big, work hard, and the

future is yours.

Love,
Mum & Dad

Thank you, Alfond Family—

All blessings on our baby, Jacoby, and on you!
Gramma

On and on, note after note.

The Seamless Field

The College Challenge bookends a Maine childhood. On one end is the $500 investment and on the other is the foundation’s commitment to secondary education and a smooth transition to higher education. For example, one project supports both the Good Will-

Hinckley School (a residential secondary school in Hinckley) and the Maine Community College System. In a burst of inspiration, Powell and Larry Sterrs, the former chairman of the strategic planning committee at Good Will-Hinckley, had an idea.

“Over a century ago,” Powell tells me, “Good Will-Hinckley provided a home to boys and girls who needed a place to grow up and needed education. But in the early 2000s, revenue and support for residential education dried up in the state, and the school stopped operating. It sat on 2,000 acres of property. We recognized potential for bringing Good Will-Hinckley back by having the school sell some of its property to the community college, which didn’t have significant resources or land to handle growing demand.”

Glenn Cummings, President and Executive Director of the Good Will-Hinckley School, doesn’t mince words: “This has been a miracle for us. That’s not an exaggeration.” John Fitzsimmons, President of the Maine Community College System, says the Alfond Foundation’s gift helped them purchase 700 acres and 13 buildings. “We’ll now be able to serve two to three thousand more Maine people.” But the gift goes beyond money; Powell’s presence was itself a boon. “Greg is a rare combination: a businessman, a lawyer, and a person with a true social conscience,” Fitzsimmons says.

The foundation worked actively to move the process forward, but it took the support and collaboration of the Maine legislature and Governor Paul LePage to make it happen. On January 23, 2012, the plan was announced at the Blaine House in Augusta. In his speech, Powell spoke of Alfond’s commitment to education: “Today, he would be delighted in knowing that our community college system will be able to give 2,000 more Maine people affordable access to higher education, and that the Good Will-Hinckley School is providing a new, hands-on education to kids who might otherwise fall behind.”

Then Powell, the wordsmith, the trial lawyer reminiscent of Atticus Finch, a man who knows how to create a compelling metaphor, said about his old friend Harold Alfond: “And he would imagine, as we do today, that pathways to college for all our citizens will someday be as clear and as seamless as a farm field at Hinckley covered with snow.”

You see how this man would sway a jury.

Powell, with humility and quiet reflection, brings bold ideas to the table. Yet he also makes those bold ideas feel like plain old common sense. For they are, after all, immensely practical ideas. Few would argue that our children don’t need or deserve a great education—it’s critical for their personal growth, their family’s financial fortunes,

and our collective economic prosperity. It's a cornerstone of our society and civic well-being. Yet in practice, it's enormously difficult to put bold ideas into motion and to move beyond partisanship. It takes teamwork. It takes the strength to rise above ideology and conflict. It takes the influence and generosity of a genuine visionary. And it takes a leader like Powell.

Yet it also takes a citizenry that pays attention. It takes people who will avail themselves of the College Challenge and make a commitment to their children's educations.

It takes people who will write a letter of hope, a letter to the future, and pin it on that bulletin board.

haroldalfondfoundation.org (haroldalfondfoundation.org)

Share The Inspiration

Love Maine.

We share stories about the people of Maine who are using their creativity and ingenuity to propel the state forward. In our 48 Hours features and other travel stories, we highlight places that make Maine so unique, and our coverage of the incredible restaurants here will make you want to explore even more. All of this is accented by beautiful photography that gives you a true sense of place.

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