



PhilanthropyRoundtable
STRENGTHENING OUR FREE SOCIETY

Resolved:

Robert Rosenkranz is working to restore intelligence and civility—one debate at a time.



Photo courtesy of the Rosenkranz Foundation

Feature from Fall 2011 issue of Philanthropy Magazine

By Naomi Schaefer Riley

My parents were communists,” volunteers Robert Rosenkranz, “but not in any sophisticated way.” It was just a part of the New York “left-wing milieu.” Rosenkranz was skeptical of their ideology, even as a boy. “Children often rebel against their parents’ ideas,” he says, “and when I heard my mother quote Marx approvingly—‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs’—it immediately struck me as wrong. After all, I thought of myself as able and hard-working, and saw no reason why those who were not should have a claim on whatever prosperity I might eventually be able to add to the world.”

Rosenkranz has indeed added to the world’s prosperity. He is the chairman and CEO of Delphi Financial Group, a public insurance company traded on the New York Stock Exchange, and the founder of a group of investment and private equity partnerships. From his midtown Manhattan office,

against the backdrop of the expansive views of the city where he grew up, he answers questions about his startling trajectory. He graduated from Yale in 1962 at the age of 19, from Harvard Law School three years later, and then went to work as a tax lawyer. He took a position as an economist with the RAND Corporation before joining Oppenheimer & Company. In 1978, he left to form his own firm, Rosenkranz & Company.

Rosenkranz has long been a philanthropist, supporting a wide variety of causes, from the Federalist Society and the Manhattan Institute to Yale University and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He is a private person—indeed, he seems a little taken aback when asked about his upbringing—but one of his most visible philanthropic projects to date is bringing attention to his own biography and intellectual development.

In 2006, Rosenkranz launched a series of Oxford-style public debates known as Intelligence Squared U.S. Before each debate, the live audience is polled, and the votes for, against, and undecided on the motion are tallied. It is the job of the opposing teams to persuade the audience; the team that moves the most votes is declared the winner. The inaugural debate featured a face-off on the proposition: “We must tolerate a nuclear Iran.” (The proponents of the motion won, narrowly, after a spirited 90-minute debate.) Since then, Intelligence Squared has sponsored more than 50 debates on topics ranging from whether to repeal Obamacare to whether it is wrong to pay for sex.

In its first two years, the series was held at an auditorium that seated 300. But the big-name participants—including Michael Crichton, David Brooks, Christopher Hitchens, Randi Weingarten, and Fareed Zakaria—the eclectic topics, and the spirited format quickly forced the program to find a bigger venue. Debates now take place in the Skirball Center at New York University, which has a seating capacity of 800—the debates are almost always sold out—and they are broadcast on 220 NPR stations. The programs were carried by Bloomberg Television, and are now broadcast by PBS. Each month 120,000 people download a podcast of an Intelligence Squared event from the iTunes store

The Dinner Party Problem

Rosenkranz says that the idea for the debate series came to him during the early years of the Clinton administration. It was then that he noticed what he calls the “dinner party problem.” “I began to feel like there was just so much anger in the level of public discourse in this country then that you couldn’t talk about public policy at a dinner table without the whole thing falling apart. It was not just disagreement over nuances in policy. It was screaming and sound bites and high levels of anger.” Conservatives started taking note of the problem after George W. Bush’s electoral victories in 2000 and 2004. But Rosenkranz remembers the Clinton hatred, too.

Rosenkranz felt as if he was watching the slow disintegration of civil discourse. Accusations of incivility have become popular in recent years—often they are used as a partisan tool to shut down one side of the argument. But that is plainly not Rosenkranz’s goal. “If you don’t have civil discourse,” says Rosenkranz, “you not only don’t appreciate the arguments on the other side, you become blind to the facts that support those arguments.”

“The great American center,” explains Rosenkranz, “is much more likely to kind of come up with a reasonably workable solution to serious national problems than are extremists on either side who are never going to carry the day.” Rosenkranz cites the recent debt-ceiling crisis as a case in point. “It was perfectly obvious that we had to pay our debts and we had to raise the debt limit to finance

government. To play politics at that point was enough to cause much of the world to lose confidence in the rationality of our system—that was just awful.”

Rosenkranz argues that far from some sort of trivial problem restricted to the tone of dinner parties, the absence of civil discourse has enormous real-world consequences, consequences that strike him as blindingly obvious. “There’s a decline in consumer confidence, there’s a decline in business confidence, there’s a decline in the confidence that the Chinese have in holding our paper,” which, he adds, “we desperately need them to do.”

In the early 2000s, at the behest of his wife, Rosenkranz started looking into different ways to encourage more civil discourse. He approached a number of possible partners, asking if they would be willing to host some debates. The responses he received disappointed him. So Rosenkranz decided to launch his debate series on his own.

During a trip to London in the fall of 2005, he had seen an Intelligence Squared debate; he enjoyed the format so much that a year later he bought the rights for an American affiliate. What appealed to him was the element of audience participation. Because they are polled before and after the debate, they have a stake in listening to both sides of every argument.

“People get so caught up in their ideologies that they don’t really look at the facts,” observes Rosenkranz. “The idea behind the debates is to compel people to engage the facts, to be open to reason, to argument, and to persuasion. The panelists need to be able to defend their views. They can’t just pontificate. They need to be persuasive. They don’t have the luxury of basking in the approval of people who already agree with them.”

Rosenkranz recognizes the scale of the problem. He worries that the market fragmentation of the media has played a large role in keeping Americans from hearing the other side of arguments. “When there were three networks, what was your business strategy?” he asks. “To try to include as many people as you can and to try to offend as few as you can. Your incentive was to be centrist. But when there are 100 cable channels, your incentive changes. Now you want to identify a narrow audience that you can get passionately committed to your side. It’s now possible—much more than it used to be—for people to live in an environment where their ideas are entirely reinforced by the media that they consume.”

Rosenkranz’s favorite debaters so far have included the historian Niall Ferguson, who argued for the proposition that Washington is more to blame for the financial crisis than is Wall Street. (“The British just seem to have rhetorical skills in their DNA,” Rosenkranz chuckles.) He was likewise impressed with Karl Rove, who argued against the proposition that “Bush 43 is the worst president in the past 50 years.” Rove is not known as a particularly powerful public speaker—more of an operator behind the scenes. But, Rosenkranz says, Rove was “so factual. He had so much data at his fingertips that he was able to refute the vague generalities of his opponents.” Perhaps unsurprisingly for a crowd on the Upper West Side, the motion carried anyway—but, Rosenkranz notes, of the people who called themselves “undecided” at the beginning of the debate and were swung by the arguments to one side or the other, almost 80 percent were persuaded by Rove.

“I always start neutral,” says Rosenkranz. “And I usually end up voting for the side that I thought did the best job rhetorically.” (He acknowledges, however, that he has yet to change his mind on many issues.) But that may be because he does so much research before the debate has even begun. At 47 out of the 53 debates, Rosenkranz has delivered remarks to introduce the topic. He is also instrumental in

choosing topics. “We don’t do debates unless we think there are good, solid, intellectually respectable arguments on both sides.”

He hopes over the next few years both to expand the series and to broaden its base of support. He would like to see an interactive website with debates online as well as a place for the aggregation of opinion articles from across the political spectrum. This fall, Intelligence Squared will be traveling to other locations as well. In October, for instance, there was a debate in Chicago as a part of the inaugural Chicago Ideas Week. The motion: “Too many kids go to college.”

[Debate: TOO MANY KIDS GO TO COLLEGE](#) from [Intelligence Squared U.S.](#) on [Vimeo](#).

All of this requires money. Rosenkranz is reluctant to say exactly how much the debates cost to produce, but he acknowledges that he remains a central funder of the effort. After five years he thinks it is time for the program to stand on its own two feet. “I’m a market kind of guy,” he says, “so I think to myself, ‘if I’m the only person who thinks this is a good idea, it probably isn’t.’” The foundation will be hiring a full-time development coordinator to help broaden support for Intelligence Squared. They have already received money from the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the American Clean Skies Foundation, as well as from a number of corporations.

Perhaps Rosenkranz’s most interesting new goal for the program, though, is to bring it to elite college campuses. “This is where your future leaders come from,” he observes, “and the discourse in academia tends to be quite one sided. Bringing a more balanced discourse to the university campuses is, I think, a very worthwhile project.

The Re-opening of the American Mind

It will not be Rosenkranz’s first foray into higher education. He credits his alma mater with opening his own mind to other points of view. “I enrolled at Yale shortly after Bill Buckley had graduated, and his book *God and Man at Yale* was still widely discussed.” That, Rosenkranz says, “gave me a sense that some very smart people were dissenting from the conventional wisdom.” It instilled in him a strong desire to expose young people to a greater diversity of ideas. He was instrumental in bringing the eminent law professor Richard Epstein to New York University. His contributions to the Federalist Society have helped invigorate debate on other law school campuses, as well. But it is not just in the political arena that Rosenkranz wants to broaden students’ thinking.

A few years ago, Yale approached him with the idea of revamping its curriculum to make it “skills-based” rather than simply “knowledge-based.” More specifically, Yale wanted its students to have a better grasp of the scientific method and of quantitative reasoning. Rosenkranz himself was an economics major for whom astrophysics is an “intellectual hobby.” (He served as a member of the visiting committee of the department of astrophysics at Princeton from 2001 to 2009, which eventually gave rise to his interest in expanding undergraduate opportunities in the sciences.)

Rosenkranz thought Yale’s ideas about curricular reform were worthwhile, but he worried that students would coast to meet the requirements, taking, as he puts it, “Rocks for Jocks.” Instead, he wanted to see courses that were rigorous—and engaging to non-majors. But who was going to create these courses? Rosenkranz was aware that a professor’s incentive is to spend the summer conducting research. “If he decides that he wants to spend his summer creating a course for non-majors—I mean, there’s no glory in that in academia, but at least there could be some money.”

With a gift of \$2 million over the course of two years, the faculty created 30 new courses. Rosenkranz has been thrilled with the results. He describes letters he has received “from kids saying, ‘I had no interest in this before, and just because I was required to do it, it has changed my life. I’m going to major in this. You’ve changed the whole way I think.’”

That, in a nutshell, is what Yale did for him. He studied politics and economics. He was introduced to physics. He even studied art and architecture with the renowned critic Vincent Scully. Rosenkranz explains that thanks to this “legendary teacher,” he developed the “desire to collect art, as well as an interest in making art.” He currently has an exhibition of his own photography at a gallery in New York. His foundation has sponsored a traveling exhibition and catalogue on the artist Mu Xin and donated a substantial collection of modern Chinese art to the art museums at Harvard. It has helped fund a series of books on the culture and civilization of China published by Yale University Press.

How did he come to start collecting Chinese art? The answer is not exactly surprising. Robert Rosenkranz loves discovering new ideas, and he takes almost visible pleasure in sharing them with others. “What attracted me to Asian art in the first place was the idea that it was unfamiliar territory and nobody else was doing it,” he explains. “I started with modern Chinese ink painting, and there were just no collectors, there was nobody taking interest in the field, and I thought it was pretty damn interesting.”

Rosenkranz has been generous to Yale over the years. Last year, he made an unrestricted gift for the construction of Rosenkranz Hall, which houses the university’s political science department and its international relations program. Certainly it helps that he considers Yale the most “strategic organization” he has ever worked with. But the affinity runs deeper. At the dedication ceremony for Rosenkranz Hall, he offered his perspective on the connection between American politics, our free-market economic system, and the largesse that has built and sustained the university.

“Why does private philanthropy loom so much larger in America than it does in other countries?” he asked his audience. “It is because new fortunes are always being created in America, and it is from new fortunes that philanthropy typically springs. New fortunes are forged on the same anvil as economic dynamism—through a process of growth, change, and innovation. That process does not benefit everyone equally, and indeed is painful for many. It has, nonetheless, been supported by our political culture. In turn, those who had the means to contemplate large-scale philanthropies have tended to do so: They seized the opportunity to provide the resources necessary for great universities and great cultural institutions.”

There is, he proposed, “a link between today’s dedication ceremony, the excellence of Yale, and the extraordinarily wise arrangements that our founding fathers, our first political scientists, bequeathed us in the Constitution.” It is a fitting historical allusion. The founders, like Rosenkranz, dreamed of a nation guided, as Hamilton wrote, by “reflection and choice,” not by “accident and force.” As ever the champion of civil exchange, Rosenkranz asked one thing only of his audience: that they listen to his thesis, and “consider it.”

Naomi Schaefer Riley is a blogger for Philanthropy Daily. Her most recent book is The Faculty Lounges: And Other Reasons Why You Won’t Get the College Education You Pay For.