

# Ordinary students learn how to give

■ Laney College course will teach working-class people how to become philanthropists

By Martin Snapp  
STAFF WRITER

On Feb. 21, Laney College in Oakland will offer a three-month course that's the first of its kind in the country: Sociology 248-GA - "Introduction to Philanthropy," which will teach ordinary people how to be philanthropists.

"I think it's time working-class people became philanthropists, too," said the instructor, Bill Somerville.

Under his tutelage, students will learn the fundamentals of grant writing from senior professionals in the philanthropic field. The final exam will be writing real-life grant proposals up to \$5,000.

Somerville has been rewriting the rules of philanthropy since 1991, when he founded Philanthropic Ventures Foundation in Oakland, using not one penny of his own money.

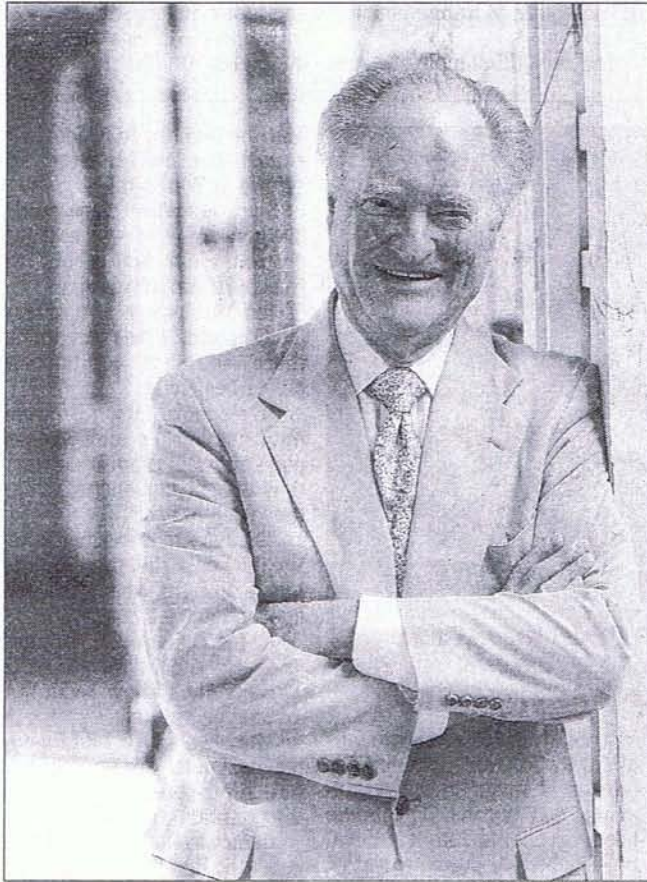
Every year, he distributes \$5 million, which comes from both institutions — such as the California Fund and the David & Lucile Packard Foundation — and more than 300 private donors.

"We think of our donors as investors in positive change, so we customize their giving for them," Somerville said. "For instance, I had lunch yesterday with a donor who said, 'Bill, I want young people in schools to get a better understanding of global warming, and I'm willing to put \$100,000 into it.'"

"So we're going to set up a competition for global warming projects in the middle schools and high schools, like science fairs. He couldn't do this for himself; he doesn't know how to do it. But we can do it for him."

Whether granting \$200 to an adolescent boy in foster care, to pursue his love of music by buying a guitar and a song book or \$65,000 to a high school principal to have an executive assistant for the first time, Somerville and his tiny three-person staff — associate director Moira Walsh, a former lawyer; program officer Dawn Hawk, a former documentary filmmaker; and administrative assistant Tina Hernandez, a mental health worker — seek out situations where a small grant will make a big difference.

"We're small potatoes compared to most foundations," he



GREGORY URQUIAGA/STAFF

**BILL SOMERVILLE**, the founding president of Philanthropic Ventures Foundation, stands outside of the office of his organization Feb. 7 in Oakland. Somerville will be teaching a philanthropy class.

said. "So we try to intervene at a critical time, when the money will do the most good."

To that end, Private Ventures Foundation eliminates the red tape, issuing its grants within 48 hours of receiving the application. "Time is precious," Somerville said. "The sooner you give the grant, the greater the impact."

The application process usually requires no paperwork beyond a simple cover letter. Many applications are accepted on trust because the grant seekers are people with whom Somerville already has a long track record.

One is Laney music professor Sherilyn Chew, whom Somerville has known since she was 16, when he recruited her to attend UC Berkeley as director of Cal's minority enrollment program.

A few years ago, she needed \$5,000 to buy instruments for students in a Chinese music orchestra she was starting at Lincoln Elementary School in Oakland.

"And he cut me a check within 48 hours, without any hassle," she said. "God bless Bill Somerville."

Such trust can be risky, but Somerville wouldn't have it any

other way.

"Yes, things could go wrong, and sometimes they do, but you have to be willing to take risks. I call it venture philanthropy. Bill Hewitt used to tell his engineers, 'Unless you have some failures, you're not doing your job right.'"

Thanks to a grant from Private Ventures Foundation, Juvenile Court judges throughout the Bay Area now have a discretionary fund to use in whatever way they think best to help the abused children who come before them — such as buying them eyeglasses, school supplies, tutoring or a warm coat.

The Art of Yoga Project in Palo Alto received \$5,000 to teach yoga and creative arts at the San Mateo Juvenile Courts Girls Camp. The Zohar Dance Company in Palo Alto received \$50,000 to teach communication, movement and dance to autistic children and kids in Juvenile Hall.

And 10 small grass-roots agencies that serve the poorest of the poor now have a guarantee of \$25,000 when the next major disaster strikes. This is immediate "first response" money

to address emergency basic needs such as food and shelter.

Somerville was born in 1932 in San Francisco and has lived all his life in the same house in North Berkeley where he grew up. He graduated from Cal in 1955 and went to work in the family printing business. In 1958, he married his high school sweetheart, chiropractor Joanne Berthelsen, and had two sons — Mark, a psychologist who runs a mental health clinic, and Frank, an anchorman at KTVU.

In 1960, he left the family business and went to work in race relations, receiving a master's degree in criminology from Cal in 1963 and founding the university's Educational Opportunities Program for minority students in 1966.

"Those were difficult years," Frank Somerville said. "The FBI was investigating us. My dad got hold of the transcripts through the Freedom of Information Act, and they said black militants were coming to our house at night. The truth was that we had a black baby-sitter."

Somerville learned philanthropy the hard way, spending 14 years going to foundations with hat in hand, begging for funds for worthy projects. Finally, in 1974, he got his chance to run a foundation himself as the first executive director of the Peninsula Community Foundation.

"I promised myself I would never treat people the way I had been treated," he said.

He and his staff work in a cozy office in Preservation Park in downtown Oakland, but he's usually out in the field, buttonholing everyone he meets and trying to find out as much as he can.

This month, his new book, "Grassroots Philanthropy: Field Notes of a Maverick Grantmaker," hits the book stores.

At age 75, he shows no signs of slowing down.

"I don't think there's a moment in the day when something new isn't percolating in his mind," said Walsh, who has been with him since 1999.

And there's zero chance he'll retire.

"It's like a religion," explained Walsh. "It's what you're put on the planet for. The last thing he's interested in is accolades or ego. He's doing it because it's the right thing to do."

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