Koch's Millions
Benefit Kansas

BY ROY WENZL, The Wichita Eagle

I t may not surprise you that Liz and Charles Koch have laid aside a little money. Money is sometimes problematic to those who have a lot of it. For one thing, it prompted the Kochs to fiercely guard their privacy. He runs the second-largest privately held company in the world.

She is president of the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

They almost never talk publicly about anything. But Liz Koch recently volunteered for an interview about the foundation’s work.

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But one consequence of never talking, Liz Koch said, is that no one but family and a few insiders know the statewide impact of the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation, which has given millions of dollars to help education, the poor, at-risk youth, the arts and environmental causes.

The foundation operates in a unique way, using some of the business ideas her husband applied to Koch Industries. It exists and operates as it does, she said, because of a deep family devotion to home and state that started with Charles Koch’s parents.

Just before Christmas, for the first time in years — while cracking wry jokes about her husband and herself — Liz Koch lifted the lid a bit for a brief peek at her, her husband, and some of their works.

One consequence of being Liz Koch is that you muzzle yourself to protect those you love; so while friends say she has a quick wit, she showed up to talk looking a little guarded.

But when she sat down, she pointed to a book on the table, “The Science of Success,” a book highly regarded in some business leadership circles, written by her husband.

“I haven’t actually read it,” she said with a grin. “Or at least not all of it. When you live with it, you soak up all those ideas by osmosis.”

And then, when asked how old she is — to the dismay of company officials sitting with her — she laughed.

“I’m 65!” she said. “And I don’t give a damn!”

The amount of money spent and the causes chosen by the foundation might surprise people, she said.

Since its founding in 1953, the foundation has given out $27 million in grants and scholarships. In the past 10 years, it has given $13.5 million to education, arts and education, environmental stewardship, and human services/at-risk youth causes.

The foundation, like the company, doesn’t just give money away, she said. It tries to invest in projects that she hopes will grow.

It’s not just giving away leaves and fishes, she said; it’s investing in people and in projects that will teach people to catch their own fish.
Declining the bird that used to cloud the skies with its flecks might be endangered. But because of a million dollars in foundation money to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in Chase County in 2006, prairie chickens and other species have an 11,000-acre haven to thrive in.

The foundation gave the money to help the Nature Conservancy complete its acquisition of the land. At the time, foundation officials said, the gift was one of the largest private donations for conservation in Kansas history.

Pollom said the foundation is passionate about environmental activism.

“I know about the past (reﬁnery) troubles,” Pollom said. “When you hear about a company getting into a situation like that, there’s always the chance that you might see them try to do what’s called ‘greenwashing,’ where they buy cover by throwing money at environmental groups. But that’s not what they did here. In their dealings with us, they asked a lot of questions, wanted to know in some detail how this would help land preservation, how it would help wildlife. They operate in a results-oriented manner. Anybody who deals with them ﬁnds out that they are nice — but if you don’t have your act together, you’re wasting your time talking to them. They don’t just throw money at things.”

Over the years, most of that $27 million has gone primarily to the Salvation Army, run in Wichita by Maj. Doug Rowland.

“When you need to have good people stay in Kansas,” she said. “Kansans are absolutely good people, and the fact is, that’s not true of every state.”

She and her husband are native Wichitans; investing here, she said, is “a free spirit.”

Addington said she doesn’t just give money, she said. As they discussed new programs, they asked Salvation Army ofﬁcials questions that sound much like the ones Charles Koch poses in his book on success and management.

“They question us extensively about what we want to do, what the money will be used for, how it will beneﬁt the community,” Rowland said.

“Addington and I are more than business partners,” Rowland said. “The Koch ofﬁcials said, ‘You need to have development.’”

She eventually worked out a mature marriage with her husband that includes not only love but friendship, coupled with a love of Kansas equal to his — and a little needling sometimes, about overworking himself, overfocusing in one direction too much. She says he will sometimes come back and say, “Don’t pick on me!”

“Don’t pick on me!” he’ll say. “I do what I do because I love what I do!”

With the foundation, Liz Koch says, she loves what she does, too.
Included in the big gifts the foundation has given recently are environmental causes: $1 million to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, and $500,000 to the Cheyenne Bottoms are environmental causes: $1 million to the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. And if it grows, how would you measure that growth?" Rowland said. "And of course with him, when he says 'measure,' he means specific numbers," Liz Koch said. Sometimes, not often, they’ve been disappointed by a well-intentioned idea that didn’t work. Or they’ve invested in a good idea that drifted off and had to be fixed. "It’s a matter of course with him, when he says 'measure,' he means specific numbers," Liz Koch said. Sometimes, not often, they’ve been disappointed by a well-intentioned idea that didn’t work. Or they’ve invested in a good idea that drifted off and had to be fixed. "And there are times they turn us down when we ask for money to help the Salvation Army in Wichita more than the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation. Over the past few decades, he said, nobody has supported the Salvation Army in Wichita more than the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation. The Salvation Army, run by Maj. Doug Rowland, is a critical component of the local safety net for pipeline releases, the largest federal fine for environmental problems in history at that time. Charles Koch said in an interview in 2007 that mistakes he made his company made, not just in Texas but with other matters, brought about some of the changes he insisted on and described in his 2007 book — for one thing, a more relentless insistence on compliance with the spirit and letter of all laws and regulations. People make mistakes, he said, including him. "I screw up all the time," he said. "Are you kidding me?" His expectation is that everybody, including himself, learn from mistakes. One charity getting foundation help for years is the Salvation Army. In 1999, the Salvation Army served 17,000 people in Wichita more than the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation. One of the foundation’s signature projects is the Flint Hills Nature Preserve. Foundation grants are awarded primarily to Kansas not-for-profit organizations. The foundation has focused its giving in the following areas: Environmental stewardship: $1.6 million Human services/at risk youth: $1.6 million Education: $8.3 million Arts/Arts education: $2 million Environmental stewardship: $1.6 million Projects: ■ As of December 2009, the foundation has given more than $2.8 million to environmental projects in Kansas. ■ A $550,000 grant helped the Koch Wetlands Exhibit at Cheyenne Bottoms near Great Bend. ■ One of the foundation’s signature projects is the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve in the Flint Hills of Kansas, with foundation gifts totaling more than $1.1 million. ■ A $350,000 gift helped make possible the Koch Habitat Hall at Wichita’s Great Plains Nature Center that opened in 2000. ■ In 2007, the foundation brought the National Symphony Orchestra to Kansas for its first-ever Kansas Residency. It included concerts in five cities throughout the state and more than 100 events scheduled in schools, libraries and retirement centers. ■ Grants from the foundation help sponsor the annual Symphony in the Flint Hills featuring the Kansas City Symphony. ■ The foundation provides funding to colleges and universities throughout the state including the...
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