

Knight Foundation head to step down



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Alberto Ibargüen steps down after 18 years

Led the transformation of the Knight brothers' legacy for a new era, investing over \$2.3 billion to support informed, engaged and inclusive communities through journalism, arts, economic development and research

Miami, FL -- Alberto Ibargüen, president of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation since 2005, publicly announced his decision to retire from the \$2.5 billion philanthropy this week. Knight Foundation's board of trustees will begin a national search immediately and Ibargüen's resignation will be effective upon the appointment of a successor.

Knight Foundation was established by John S. and James L. Knight, brothers who led one of America's largest and most successful 20th-century newspaper companies. It was [their belief](#) that a well-informed community could best "determine its own true interests" and they entrusted future generations of trustees to do just that. Ibargüen, the former publisher of the Miami Herald and El Nuevo Herald, has led the multibillion-dollar fund for nearly two decades and overseen the disbursement of \$2.3 billion.

Among Knight Foundation achievements during his tenure:

- Defending freedom of speech and the press in the digital age through strategic litigation, research and public education by establishing the [Knight First Amendment Institute](#) at Columbia University and an endowment at the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press to support legal assistance to news organizations.
- Helping the City of Detroit come out of bankruptcy and protecting the Detroit Institute of Arts by [participating](#) in the "Grand Bargain."
- Developing a field of scholarly research needed to address the impact of technology on media and democracy by creating the Knight Research Network, which includes academic centers and individual research projects throughout the United States.
- ["Making art general"](#) in Knight's headquarters city of Miami by investing more than \$210 million and leveraging countless more private and public contributions.
- Increasing the diverse asset management of the country's largest endowments by ensuring Knight Foundation's own endowment was managed by [diverse-owned firms](#) and publishing reports on the state of the field.
- Improving the graduation rates of college athletes by continuing to

support [The Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics](#).

ABOUT ALBERTO IBARGÜEN

Ibargüen joined the foundation at a pivotal time for journalism. New social media platforms and emerging technologies were simultaneously altering established news business models and retooling the dissemination of information. Knight had a chance to play a crucial role in assisting media organizations and others to adapt to this new world.

The organization's leadership wanted to see these new technologies leveraged and applied for good in a way that supported the Knight brothers' long-standing goal of enabling communities to be informed and engaged.

For nearly 75 years, journalism has played a central role at Knight Foundation. The foundation has sought to make investments that promote quality journalism so that people are able to access the consistently reliable news and information they need to make informed decisions on the issues that impact their daily lives.

"The question in my mind is not how to save the traditional news industry, but how to meet the information needs of communities in a democracy so that the people might, as Jack Knight put it, 'determine their own true interests'," Ibargüen has said often.

As a former news publisher, he believed that traditional media was falling behind the pace of digitization, misinformation and disinformation, losing the public's trust. From 2005 to 2021, more than 2,000 American local print newspapers closed and the number of employed American newspaper journalists fell dramatically. He worked with foundation trustees to support not only journalism education and training, but also finding sustainable business models for the effective delivery of news.

Though well known for its journalism programs, the majority of the foundation's funding has traditionally focused on the betterment of 26 cities, known as Knight communities, that once hosted Knight newspapers. Reflecting the respect for local news that was the hallmark of Knight Newspapers and, later, Knight Ridder newspapers, the foundation's funding strategy in each city takes a distinctly local approach to informed and engaged community building. In Akron, Ohio, and Macon, Georgia, for example, Knight supported revitalizing their downtowns, and in Charlotte, North Carolina, the emphasis has been on development of the Historic West End. In Miami and Detroit, the arts are major areas of focus, and in Philadelphia, the reimagining of public spaces.

Knight has also invested in 26 community and place-based foundations, creating donor-advised funds and special purpose funds to encourage the highest levels of engagement in local problem-solving.

Knight's arts-in-community programs were bolstered by a three-year study in these 26 cities. The study made clear what the foundation had already felt, that in community, arts play a special role in connecting people to place and to one another. That, in part, explains why an average of one-fifth of the foundation's total annual funding is committed to the arts. And, since 2005, \$466 million has been invested in museums and arts organizations, as well as in artists directly.

"When we invest in music and museums, in poetry and performances, we are investing in the connections – shared experiences – that help to build a sense of community in our pluralistic society," Ibargüen has said, "and it's also just plain fun." Funds have been used to support hundreds of projects that include young Bharatanatyam dancers in St. Paul, putting poetry on a sky banner behind a single-engine plane flying up and down Miami Beach, and digitizing

the Motown Museum archive in Detroit.

"He has been visionary," said Francisco L. Borges, chair of the board. "Digital transformation has pushed us to find new ways to sustain our democracy and Alberto has provided us with the insights to do just that."

In 2019, Knight [announced](#) a \$300 million investment over five years to scalable news organizations committed to serving communities at the local level by building sustainable, digital business models, strengthening investigative reporting, protecting press freedom, promoting news literacy and connecting with audiences through civic engagement and technology. The foundation endowed dozens of university department chairs and deans advising and developing journalism industry talent, helped establish the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, and financed the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press with funds for legal services to local newsrooms, a project that recently garnered support from Microsoft and the national law firm of Davis Wright Tremaine.

For Knight, a successful investment catalyzed additional funds from others. When the City of Miami, the State of Florida or private donors match a foundation gift, or corporations like Microsoft or IBM join a Knight funding model, trustees can be confident that the impact of their grant will be maximized.

Technology and the speed at which it provokes change in communication and information dissemination is a constant preoccupation at Knight. Its potential for good and bad, along with its impact on U.S. democracy, requires an evolving approach that changes over time. In 2017, Knight began working on [research](#) around American trust in news, which served as a corollary to citizen participation, and in 2019, they launched the [Knight Research Network](#), to encourage this field of academic study.

Aimed at fostering diverse perspectives, research and scholarship on how technology affects media and democracy, Knight began with various grants to support centers of excellence at Carnegie Mellon University, George Washington University, New York University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the University of Washington, and later evolved to include grants to think tanks and scholars with a range of viewpoints.

At a recent conference created to gather this group of thought leaders, Ibargüen said: "As the digital public square continues to evolve, the challenges to an informed citizenry will intensify, power will further consolidate, governments will exert global influence and political leaders will offer solutions that will range from prescient to disastrous. The need for good data and thoughtful alternatives has never been more urgent. We approach the work with humility, and understand it as a call to action to help encourage and develop a field of inquiry many of you in this room have pioneered. That, it seems to us, is the proper role of philanthropy."

"Alberto has been a steadfast and visionary leader of the Knight Foundation and worked tirelessly to carry out the mission set out by John and James Knight, in a way relevant for in our times, which they only could imagine," said Borges. "His passionate pursuit of innovative and bold ideas that support the foundation's mission regardless of the pressures and challenges to our democracy and society is his legacy. We applaud his enlightened leadership and service."

At a meeting with Knight staff on the day of the publicly announced retirement, Ibargüen reminded the group: "We are social investors and require a return in the form of impact and outcomes in community, that through informed and engaged communities, lead to a more perfect democracy."

"We believe in free speech, engaged communities in all their diversity, and in equity and inclusion. Operationally, we do not run programs but instead support programs and ideas by people and organizations that actually get things done. Nothing is more satisfying than to be able to support brilliant insights and innovation by capable people and say, 'I never imagined that but it's exactly what I had in mind,'" he said.



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