

# Perpetual

Every day, millions of people around the world tear open boxes and envelopes marked with the ubiquitous orange and purple FedEx logo.

And in today's global marketplace, it's increasingly likely these packages have arrived from distant locations beyond U.S. borders, requiring a complex choreography of regulations, time, and technology that is largely invisible to the consumer; most of us don't give it a second thought.

But Peter Tower thought about it—all the time. Over his three-and-a-half decade tenure in leadership at his family's customs brokerage business, C.J. Tower and Sons, he changed the international logistics landscape by integrating new technologies that made the process of moving goods from one country to another more efficient than ever.

His introduction of IBM data processing to the Western New York-based company established it as the first fully-automated customs brokerage company in the nation, and by the time he sold C.J. Tower and Sons to McGraw-Hill in 1986, its operation was 90 times the size it had been when he had taken his first job there some 40 years earlier.

Later, the company was sold again to FedEx, which continues to this day to use the technology and systems pioneered by Peter Tower.

A Niagara Falls native, Tower had a passion for flight and earned his pilot's license and control tower operator's license while he was a student at Cornell University. Also while at Cornell, Tower met Elizabeth Nelson Clarke, a fellow student and a young artist. She was a voracious reader and quick learner with a passion for the ordinary and extraordinary dimensions of the world around her.

The two married in 1942, one year before Peter was drafted. During World War II, he served in the U.S. Army Air Force in air traffic control from 1943 to 1946.

Elizabeth and Peter welcomed two daughters, Mollie in 1944 and Cynthia in 1947. After Peter's service ended, the family settled in Western New York, where he joined the family company, C.J. Tower and Sons, while Elizabeth took art lessons.

"They were both really curious people and just dove into whatever they were doing," the couple's younger daughter, Cynthia Doyle, says. "Our mother was a striking person, so beautiful, and she was a true individual."

"She didn't go to tea parties or wear white gloves or carry a fancy purse," their elder daughter, Mollie Byrnes, adds. "She was up on the third floor painting all the time."

*photo by Mark Dellas*

*by* Cassandra Gainer



# Motion

The Peter and Elizabeth Tower Foundation

Together, Peter and Elizabeth were fierce individuals and a force to be reckoned with. While Elizabeth spent long hours in her art studio—building what is today a prolific portfolio of paintings—Peter often worked nights and weekends at the office. Their daughters recall dinnertime conversations that revolved around the business—Elizabeth was a sounding board and confidante for Peter.

The Towers' passion and work ethic were a thread line through everything they did, whether at work or at home. And even as their fortune grew with Peter at the helm of the family business, they never strayed from who they were at their cores.

"These were people who had been through the Depression and World War II—they grew out of that," Byrnes says. "Dad and mom taught us to be useful—we learned how to cook and do laundry, garden and mow the lawn."

"We had a nice house, and we weren't deprived, but we weren't 'fancy,'" Doyle continues. "I remember stories of my father's time on the board of M&T Bank—while other men were pulling up their fancy shirt sleeves to show off their Girard-Perregaux watches, my dad would be wearing a Kmart shirt and a Timex. That was sort of who he was. He had a sense of humor, he didn't make a big deal out of himself. He had humility, and he worked hard at whatever he was doing."

In 1990, the year after Peter's retirement, the Towers established the Peter and Elizabeth Tower Foundation.

"[My father] wasn't particularly philanthropic when we were growing up—every dime he made he poured back into the business," Doyle recalls. "At one point, I was the head of a soup kitchen and shelter and I remember him asking me why the people I was serving didn't go out and get jobs."

"But he went through a huge change over his life. He learned that people didn't choose to struggle, to not find work, and that there were systems in place preventing them from progressing," she continues. "He was a hard worker, but he was also very compassionate and very open-minded. A lot of people might have held on to those original beliefs, but he didn't. He was a committed lifetime learner, and he wanted to make a difference."

So when an estate planning lawyer suggested the creation of a charitable foundation, the challenge appealed to Tower.

"His money was too much to spend, too much to give to us," Byrnes says. "He had a philosophy of not 'ruining' your children by giving them too much money. I realize now as an adult what a good thing that was."

The Tower Foundation's mission is to support equitable communities where all young people are included, accepted, and valued. Mollie and Cynthia now serve on the Foundation's

board, helping to ensure their parents' vision is realized.

The Foundation acts as a grant-maker, partner, and advocate, distributing upwards of \$5 million annually to help families and young people in Western New York and Eastern Massachusetts impacted by intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, mental health challenges, and substance use disorders. To date, they have granted more than \$28 million in community funding.

"These were all issues that our family had dealt with," Doyle says, "and though they weren't particularly sexy, they were areas where there was a need."

Tracy Sawicki joined the Tower Foundation as Executive Director in 2011 with nearly three decades of experience in non-profit administration, fundraising, and program development. Before joining the foundation, Sawicki had worked for over a decade at the Buffalo Chapter of the American Red Cross.

"My predecessor at the Tower Foundation, their first executive director, would tell you that her work with Peter was to set up the infrastructure right—an infrastructure that was efficient, that was effective," Sawicki says. "It was just a joy to get here and be able to say, 'Wow, this is a well-oiled machine.' Since the infrastructure worked so well, it gave me the privilege to ask the trustees and the board, including Cynthia and Mollie, 'What is it that we want to do next?'"

Sawicki equates her role and her aim as she joined the Foundation to Peter's when he'd first started working for his family's business all those years ago. When he joined the company, he looked for opportunities to help the business reach its goals more effectively and efficiently. Sawicki, when she joined the Tower Foundation, asked the same questions he must have asked five decades earlier: "Can we assess how we do our work? Does what we currently do still make sense? How can we do our work a bit differently?"

It was an approach perfectly aligned with one of Peter's defining sayings: "Keep wiggling." Peter understood that constantly evolving in ways large and small, in forward and sideways motion—"wiggling"—was the key to success. You must keep moving, changing, learning.

One way the Tower Foundation has evolved in recent years is through an increased focus on capacity building and partnership with established community organizations. According to their website, the foundation seeks to fund projects that "build and strengthen the systems, structures, cultures, skills, and resources organizations need to serve their communities."

"There are times when we are small compared to other organizations, and times when we are large compared to others," Byrnes says. "When I look at the work, I think we are in a sweet spot—we're nimble because we're not huge, but we're not so small





painting by Liz Tower



painting *by* Liz Tower



that we can't influence other foundations and make a difference."

"We aren't doing this alone," Doyle continues. "Another unique thing about the foundation is that Tracy has brought together a 'funders group.' There's a huge exchange of information, and it's not just the Tower Foundation, alone, investing in a problem. We bring other foundations together to make bigger investments instead of dribbling a little money here and there."

To further enable collaboration, the Foundation has established the Institute for Nonprofit Management and Leadership, a certificate program that enables a diverse community of non-profit leaders with critical skills and networks to drive their organizations to success.

The organization is also spending more time considering the concept of intersection—the ways in which their focus areas converge with systemic issues of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and others.

"We have to look at something bigger than just ourselves, because our work touches lots of different systems," Sawicki explains. "I always think about Peter in this area, because in his career, he was always thinking ahead to how systems affected the work. There are always multiple issues, components, and influences that affect a person, a family, a community.

"If you do your work in a vacuum, you can make a difference in the life of an individual, perhaps, but the difference you really want to see is larger change in the community, so that everyone benefits. You have to look at the environment in which everything works, and that's where our work is going. It's another example of 'wiggling.'"

In the spirit of these commitments to collaboration and large-scale change through an intersectional framework, the Foundation, with the help of partner organizations, has created and funded a community advisory group of 18 young people ages 18 to 30 who identify with one of the Foundation's issue areas, to learn more about what they see as needs in their communities. The group meets regularly and through discussion and mentorship are given the opportunity to invest \$200,000, provided by the Foundation, into a funding idea.

"This gives participants who identify with one of our focus areas the opportunity to work with people with different identities—someone who's in recovery from substance abuse, for example, working with someone with an intellectual disability," Sawicki explains. "They experience what it means to have people with different identities come to the table and work together. And that's one of our goals, to learn how to integrate people of all differences into decision-making positions in the community. It's not easy. It requires modifications. It requires time. But we believe it's important to live your values."

According to Doyle, the hard work is worth it.

"These young people ask questions that would never occur to me to ask but that are so important and compelling," Doyle marvels. "We're really learning from them. That is real. I thought I was going to go and just listen, but I was blown away by what I learned."

Thirty years after its founding, and a decade after Elizabeth Tower's passing in 2013 and Peter's in 2014, the Tower Foundation continues to evolve today. The Tower daughters remain confident that their parents would be pleased with the direction of the Foundation.


While helping him develop his legacy statement during his later years, Doyle recalls asking her father about what was important to him to be maintained after he was gone.

"He answered by telling me that 'nothing I can say today would be better than what wise people will say and do in the future.' He wanted us to just go for it, and he believed there would always be smart people around who would know what to do," she says. "He really didn't want to be memorialized. One thing about my dad was ... it wasn't 'my way or the highway.' He really believed in trying to be the best you could be, not getting stuck on one way of being, and responding to what you learn. I think that value is really held by the foundation."

Sawicki nods in agreement.

"The Towers were risk takers. I met Peter when he was 90, and he told me that when he had the idea for transforming his business, he said to Elizabeth, 'It's a big risk and it's gonna make us or break us. But my hunch is that we should do it.' And the rest is history," Sawicki says. "They took the risk. They learned from mistakes. Then they did better. That definitely runs through the Foundation as well. There are some projects we take the risk on. We are open to that. A lot of foundations are not because they are focused on delivering perfection, and there's no such thing. There just isn't. Sometimes risk is uncomfortable, but we learn from it."

In other words—in Peter Tower's words—"keep wiggling." That simple, irreverent catchphrase captured Peter and Elizabeth Tower's lifelong belief in the perpetual, forward movement of progress that makes us all better.

"The world constantly changes," Sawicki says. "And Peter and Elizabeth understood that we have to change with it." 

*To learn more about the Tower Foundation, visit [thetowerfoundation.org](http://thetowerfoundation.org).*