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Peeeeewww

by Noel Weyrich

Rebecca Rimel needs to stop treating the richest charity in America like it's none of our beeswax

Earlier this year, **Rebecca Rimel**, queen bee of the \$4 billion honeypot that is **Pew Charitable Trusts**, became this city's foremost Person to Watch, though not in the usual sense.

Rimel is hardly some up-and-comer. As chief dispenser of \$150 million or so in grant money every year, she has long been the most powerful woman in Philadelphia. The latest wrinkle in her reign, though, is a change in Pew's tax status that makes her one of the most powerful women in America, too. As of January 1st, Pew became a public charity, giving the formerly private foundation vast new abilities to run its own projects, raise money from other foundations, lobby Congress, and even start up for-profit spin-offs. Pew is now the fattest pile of unrestricted cash in the entire charity world.

It's easy to assume that what's good for Pew is good for Philadelphia. But **Rebecca Rimel** is also the most feared woman in town, and all these new powers are unlikely to improve her reputation as a thin-skinned, insecure bully with an agenda as inscrutable as she is. Rimel wields Pew's hoard as a very blunt instrument. She once cut off the Orchestra's funding because it was running a deficit, which only made the deficit worse. Her clumsy effort to get Governor Ridge to cough up state money for the Independence Visitor Center reeked of high-stakes extortion. A similar threat to pull funding from the Kimmel Center played almost as poorly.

This flair for the dramatic has left the local nonprofit community literally dumbstruck on the subject of **Rebecca Rimel**. Even those who defend her methods avoid being quoted on the record -- a level of anxiety-driven respect normally reserved for presidents and mobsters.

As a trained emergency-room nurse with an MBA, Rimel has a style that might be seen as tough-love triage, in which only strong cultural groups deserve an "investment" (Rimel's word). On the national stage, however, Rimel's sharp elbows and bottom-line approach have affected important public-policy issues. To Pacific Northwest environmentalists, Pew's moneyed intervention in the fight over clear-cutting public forests forced an unwelcome compromise, born of Rimel's desire for "accommodation" with logging interests.

New Mexico activists got similarly sandbagged by Pew on the Endangered Species Act renewal. One called Pew a "death star" with "an enormous gravitational field." That's why the nonprofit world is so worried about the New Pew. As head of a huge public charity with no specific mission, Rimel can impose her will on whatever causes she happens to find compelling. The worries multiply when one considers how poorly she handles criticism. After Rimel disdainfully nitpicked a recent article in the Chronicle of Philanthropy opposing Pew's charity status, the author responded that Rimel hadn't returned his repeated calls and had forbidden her staff to talk to him.

That's typical of Rimel's relations with the press. Only two local in-depth profiles of her have ever been written, and each ended with Rimel withdrawing her cooperation when the tone of the questions grew less than adulatory. Both reporters found that some Rimel supporters, omerta-style, didn't even want her to know they had talked.

Rimel accomplished her meteoric rise to the head of Pew by attaching herself to a powerful board member, neurosurgeon Thomas Langfitt. She became her mentor's second-in-command as Langfitt first ascended to the Pew presidency and then fired just about every senior staffer in the house -- except Rimel.

So it's hardly surprising that some of the truly cockamamie ideas on which Rimel has squandered Pew's lucre put her up close to very powerful people. Pew's costly funding of weekend retreats in Hershey for members of Congress did nothing to reduce partisan rancor, but got Rimel on the map in D.C. A 1997 "national summit on voluntarism" cost \$1.4 million. Then-mayor Ed Rendell compared its usefulness to "throw[ing] that money out on Market Street." But President Clinton attended and Colin Powell chaired, and Rimel and her board got to schmooze with them. Ed wisely retracted his remark.

Rimel has occasionally explained away her secretiveness and guile as modesty, posing as a mere instrument of her board when everyone knows that the compliant Pew family members who dominate that board almost never take issue with her. These are Becky's billions, and her overbearing ways with them are beginning to reap what they have sown. The effort to move the Barnes Foundation is foundering in court amid evidence that the judge doesn't appreciate getting squeezed by Rimel's ultimatum that the Barnes move or go bust. Nonprofit watchdogs, the few that there are, were incensed by Pew's decision to pursue its new tax status without any prior public notice, and doubt Rimel's promises not to compete with grassroots groups for funding.

Foundations are required to give away about five percent of their holdings every year, minus overhead. This means that every nickel spent on Pew's staff and office space is a nickel that would otherwise be earmarked for charity. Yet Pew staffers draw far higher salaries than the nonprofit leaders who must beg them for grants. Indeed, why does **Rebecca Rimel** need \$650,000 a year just to give money away? With all of Pew's high-paid help, would anyone notice if she were replaced by a chimpanzee named Sparky who mediated staff disputes by jiggling a magic eight ball? More importantly, imagine what other charities could do with Rimel's \$650,000, minus the cost of Sparky's bananas.

The New Pew needs to start answering these and other questions, because its charitable designation is merely a probationary one. Rimel and her crew have five years to prove they know how to do this public-interest thing, or the IRS just might force Pew right back inside its private-foundation bubble. Pew could start building a track record for openness by launching a PEWatch project. It might get an independent thinker -- you know, someone with a kind of contrarian turn of mind -- to take a critical look at its workings and expose some of its sillier ideas. A quarterly New Pew Review should make staffers more circumspect at salary time, and maybe crackpot notions like the voluntarism summit and the congressional retreats would remain safely locked away in Rimel's ambition-addled mind.

My application's in and my fingers are crossed, though I suspect, as Sparky's eight ball might say, "All signs point to 'No.'"