

# What's in a Name: A Popular Guide to Wealth & Influence at GVSU





# Why a Guide on Wealth & Influence at GVSU?

A few years ago there was a brief opening prompted by some students and faculty to have a discussion about the influence that wealthy donors to GVSU have on the climate at that campus. An article appeared in the student newspaper, *The Lanthorn*, which generated a significant amount of discussion and an interesting reaction from the administration. GVSU administrators made it clear to students who dared to question the influence that wealthy donors have on campus by telling them to shut up.

Professor Michael Ott wrote to *The Lanthorn* in response to the issue and articulated the fundamental problem with “corporate donations” to GVSU. *“The concern and problem of universities courting corporate donations as a means for their continuance and growth, not only here at GVSU but on campuses across the nation, is historically grounded, particularly in the recent experience of the wealthy and powerful corporate elite’s reconstructing not only the economy but also the supposedly independent realm of politics into a means of furthering and legitimating their own agenda and culture as the national norm.”*

The purpose of this guide is to not only point out the number of wealthy donors to GVSU, but to shed some light on who these people are, what they stand for and how they are influencing policy and practice at GVSU.

Those who have economic power do not donate merely to have their names plastered on the front of buildings, rather the contribution is a way to influence outcomes of institutions like GVSU. Within a Neo-Liberal capitalist world, universities are essentially a place where economic talent is fashioned in order to serve the goals of the economy, despite the claims that it is a place for intellectual exploration.

In addition, having the names and images of wealthy donors adorn virtually every flat surface on campus is a way to normalize the benevolence of those with power and privilege. As the GVSU administration stated in response to this controversy a few years ago, people should just be grateful for the generosity of those with wealth.

Lastly, it is important that students, faculty and community members understand that the politics of those who have donated has done concrete harm to the more marginalized sectors of society. Most of these donors also support in one form or another, economic exploitation, racism, homophobia, patriarchy and other forms of oppression. Therefore, what does it mean to students, faculty and community to be constantly confronted with the oppressive power and influence these wealthy donors have had and continue to have in West Michigan?



# How to use the Guide



The Popular Guide to Wealth & Influence at GVSU includes maps of both the Downtown Grand Rapids campus and the Allendale campus. These maps have a listing of locations of names of wealthy donors. There are many, many more that could be listed, but for the purposes of this guide, we identify the most prominent donors.



In addition to the maps, we then provide pages of documentation on these individuals, their politics and how they use their influence on campus and in the community.



We encourage students, faculty and community to use the guide to: 1) conduct your own physical tour as a means to have lively discussion about the implications of said donors, or 2) to simply have those discussions in class, over coffee or in social media so that there is greater awareness of the critical issues around power and privilege that the guide seeks to illuminate.

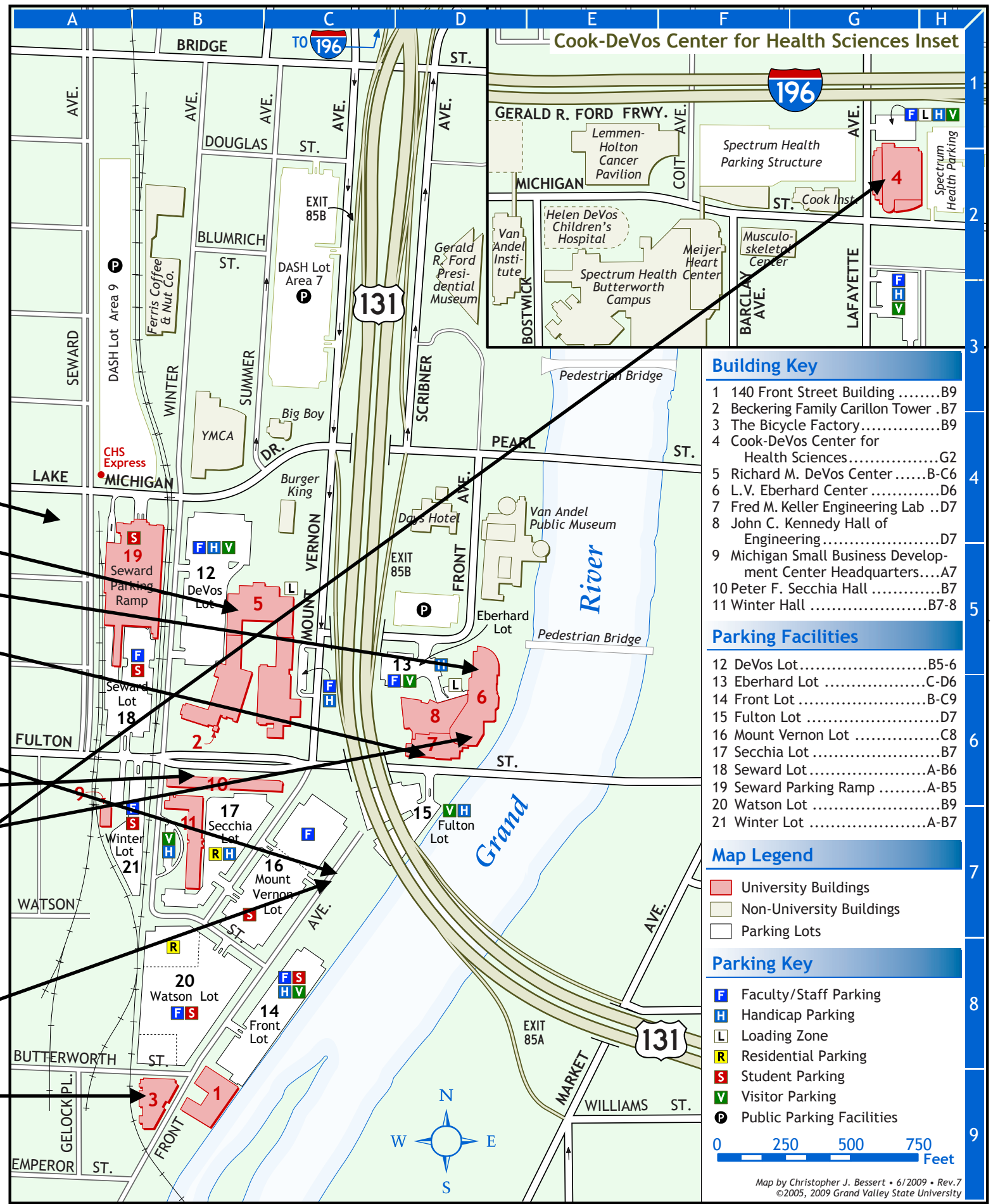


At the end there will be a list of sources used in the research and additional materials that explore the issues raised in the guide in more detail.

# WARNING

Funding that comes from the capitalist class can threaten your free speech rights on campus, be detrimental to your conscience and prevent you from experiencing or practicing collective liberation.

1. Robert C. Pew Campus
2. Richard DeVos Center
3. LV. Eberhard Center
4. Fred Keller Engineering Lab
5. John Kennedy Hall of Engineering
6. Van Andel Global Trade Center
7. Peter Seechia Hall
8. Meijer Broadcasting Center
9. Cook DeVos Center for Health Sciences
10. Siedman College of Business
11. Dorothy Johnson Center for Philanthropy





1. Robert Pew - The downtown campus is named after Robert Pew. Pew was the head of the office furniture giant Steelcase and served as chairman of the board at Steelcase for 25 years. Pew made millions off the labor of Steelcase workers and then used that money to support business interests throughout the area by serving on the Michigan Chamber of Commerce. In the 1990s, Forbes magazine listed the Pew family as among the top 25 wealthiest in the country. Like most wealthy people, Pew served on numerous corporate boards and was also a member of the Grand Valley State Colleges Citizen's Council, providing him with an opportunity to influence policy at GVSU particularly as it related to economic policy in West Michigan.



2. Richard DeVos - Co-founder of the Amway Corporation, Rich DeVos has been the single largest donor to GVSU throughout its history. In 2016, Forbes magazine lists Rich DeVos as the 84th richest person in the country, at \$6.3 Billion. DeVos acquired his wealth through the pyramid scheme of Amway, making billions off the work of others. DeVos has also increased and maintained his wealth by influencing public policy around workers rights, tax breaks and supporting political candidates that zealously defend Neo-liberal capitalism at both the national and state level.



Richard DeVos has provided millions of dollars of support to think tanks and other national groups like the Heritage Foundation, Americans for Prosperity, the Council for National Policy and the American Enterprise Institute. DeVos has also supported local entities that promote Neoliberal capitalist policies such as The Acton Institute and the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.



DeVos has also funded religious right groups over the years such as the Family Research Council, Focus on the Family, the Haggai Institute and the Luis Palau Evangelistic Association. His support for religious right policies have included anti-LGBT funding, pro-patriarchy funding and the imposition of religion in public policy. On one of the many DeVos plaques on campus, it states that he was President of the Council for National Policy, created at the beginning of the Reagan years, the CNP is dedicated to supporting imperialist US foreign policy and making the US function under a quasi-theocratic structure dictated by Judeo-Christian principles.

The Amway co-founder is said to have increased his funding to GVSU in the late 1970s with the condition that the university would end William James and Thomas Jefferson Colleges. Since then Richard DeVos has influenced the fight for domestic partner benefits, which resulted in delaying faculty and staff from getting domestic partner benefits by 13 years. DeVos has also fought against the unionization of GVSU faculty and staff and was a major player in making Michigan a Right to Work state.



3. LV Eberhard - LV Eberhard made his money from a chain of grocery stores in West Michigan, selling mostly processed and unhealthy food from a profit-driven food system. Eberhard was not fond of disobedient workers and their unions. In April 1990, lawyers for United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 951 asked the U.S. Department of Labor to investigate the stock ownership plan and Mr. Eberhard's role as its only administrator. Union officials charged that Mr. Eberhard inflated the value of the stock to benefit himself when he authorized the sale of employer stock-owned buildings in exchange for stock. Eberhard gave GVSU \$1 million, which led to the first building of the downtown campus, a building that has his name on it. Eberhard was said to want GVSU to promote strong business values in its students.



4. Fred Keller - Fred Keller is the CEO of Cascade Engineering and is often referred to someone who supports liberal causes. However, Keller has made his wealth off the labor of those who work for him. In addition, Keller is involved in influencing public policy that benefits the business community, through his work with the West Michigan Policy Forum, which has supported tax breaks for the rich and making Michigan a Right to Work state. Keller is a proponent of the Triple Bottom line, which is the notion that you can be socially responsible, environmentally conscious and still make a profit. Keller has influenced GVSU to produce more entrepreneurs and talent for the West Michigan business community.



5. John Kennedy - John Kennedy is the former President and CEO of Autocam, where he made million of dollars from the labor of those workers. Kennedy has supported reactionary politics by serving on the board of The Acton Institute, has funded anti-abortion campaigns and took a very public stand against the Affordable Care Act. Kennedy has also served larger business interests by sitting on the board of the Right Place Inc. and by playing an active role in the West Michigan Policy Forum. Kennedy gave money to GVSU to promote talent creation for local businesses.



**Fight the Academic Industrial Complex!**



6. Jay Van Andel - Co-founder of Amway with Rich DeVos, Van Andel was less public than DeVos, but he made billions off the labor of people working for his pyramid scheme. Van Andel funded numerous rightwing groups, both religious and secular. The religious groups that Van Andel funded while he was alive and continues to fund through his foundation are The Acton Institute, Bethany Christian Services, Campus Crusade, Creation Research Society, Morality in Media, Mel Trotter Ministries and Guiding Light. Van Andel also provided funding to the right wing think tank, The Heritage Foundation, was the Chairman of the US Chamber of Commerce and sat on the board of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The NED has been another tool of US foreign policy to promote and strengthen US Imperialism.



7. Peter Seechia - Seechia is the former CEO of Universal Forest Products and the US Ambassador to Italy during the Reagan administration. Seechia made his wealth off the labor of workers at Universal Forest Products and has been involved in numerous groups that promote Neo-Liberal capitalist policies that benefit the economic class he is part of. Seechia has been a major player in the West Michigan Policy Forum and was instrumental in their effort to get Right to Work legislation passed at the state level. Seechia has also been a major supporter of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. Seechia has used his money to influence policy at GVSU to push the university in a more pro-business direction and as a talent pool for local companies.



8. Fred Meijer - Fred Meijer was the CEO of Meijer Inc for decades and made his wealth off the labor of those who worked at one of his dozens of grocery stores and warehouses. Fred Meijer was worth \$5 billion when he died in 2011. Like most wealthy people Meijer influenced public policy by buying political candidates or lobbying elected officials. The Meijer corporation is also notorious for strong arming local communities to provide massive tax breaks and access to lots of land when they want to build a new store. Meijer's name is on the WGVU broadcasting center at GVSU and the radio and TV station primarily serves business interests and provides little if any role for the public, despite being a public broadcaster. Students at GVSU might consider pushing for greater access to the radio and TV station to provide more local information and analysis of what is central to their lives.



9. Peter Cook - Cook is the former Chairman of Mazda Great Lakes, where he made millions of the labor of others and the sale of cars. Cook has funded numerous groups on the religious right, such as Campus Crusade for Christ, Michigan Family Forum, the Mackinac Center, the Acton Institute, Teach Michigan and Gospel Films in Muskegon. Like Richard DeVos, Cook also served as a member on the board of the Council for National Policy. Cook was a major funder, along with Richard DeVos, for the new health sciences building on Michigan St. in Grand Rapids. During the fund raising efforts in 1995 for the proposed health sciences building, Cook and DeVos threatened to withdraw funding for the building if the university passed domestic partner benefits for faculty and staff. Money won out and domestic partner benefits were denied until 13 years later in 2008.



10. William Seidman - William Seidman made his money by exploiting people through his family's accounting business, known as BDO Seidman. Seidman was also an economic advisor for Presidents Ford, Reagan and George H. W. Bush, meaning he was an architect for Neo-Liberal Capitalism. In addition, Seidman was the chairman of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) and is credited with providing "stability" for the banking industry, because the banks "are too big to fail." This sentiment really means that the banking system is too important to systems of power and are necessary for the transfer of wealth from working people to the business class. Seidman has near sainthood status, which is why the new business school was named after him.



11. Dorothy Johnson - Dorothy Johnson made her wealth by acting as President and Chief Executive Officer of the Council of Michigan Foundations for 25 years. Johnson was also former chair of the Kellogg Foundation, which is one of the 25 largest foundations in the world. Johnson's influence in the business world was to promote the role of philanthropic giving, which is code for creating tax havens for the rich and then using that wealth to influence public policy and engage in population management. The Dorothy Johnson Center for Philanthropy acts as an apologist for the regional capitalist class and legitimizes the functions of foundations which have no interest in supporting real social change, especially change that threatens the power of wealthy donors.

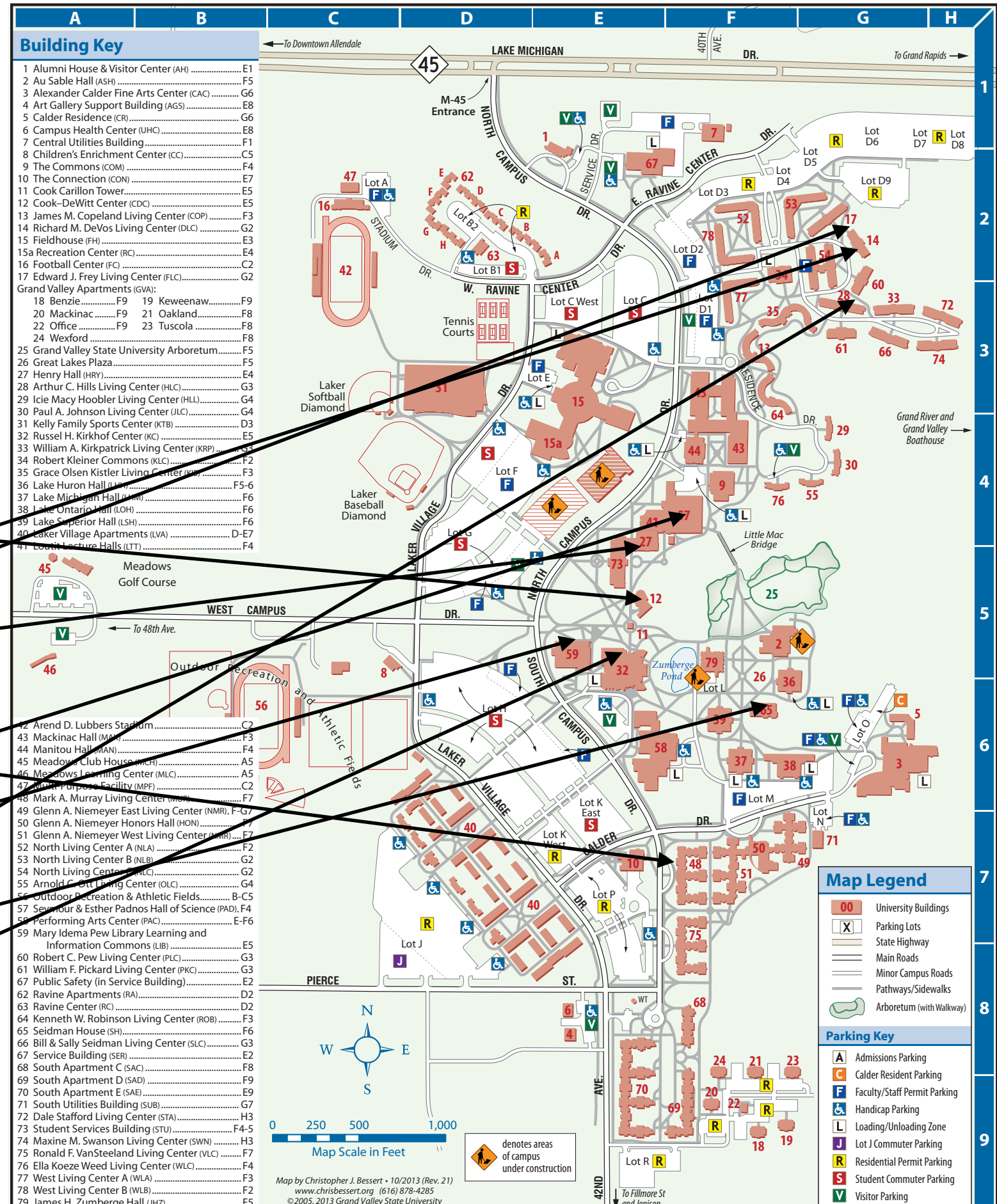




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1. Cook-DeWitt Center
2. Richard DeVos Living Center
3. Edward Frey Living Center
4. Henry Hall
5. Mark Murray Living Center
6. Padnos Hall of Science
7. Mary Idema Pew Library
8. Robert Pew Living Center
9. Seidman House
10. Russel Kirkhof Center



1. Peter Cook/Gary DeWitt - The DeWitt Families Conduit Foundation is funded by the DeWitt family, which made its fortune via Bill and Marvin DeWitt's founding of Bill Mar Foods (a turkey, cow, pig, and chicken slaughterhouse operation) that was purchased by Sara Lee (a major animal slaughtering company) in 1987. The foundation donates to many conservative churches and funds "religious right" groups such as Focus on the Family, the Michigan Family Forum, Family Research Council and organizations connected to Chuck Colson, Jerry Falwell, and Dr. James Kennedy. The DeWitt Family has also provided funding for numerous anti-LGBT campaigns. Seems ironic that the building that is used as a chapel would be funded by two families with strong ties to the religious right. (For information on Peter Cook, see page 8 of this guide.)



2. Richard DeVos - Co-founder of the Amway Corporation, Rich DeVos has been the single largest donor to GVSU throughout its history. In 2016, Forbes magazine lists Rich DeVos as the 84th richest person in the country, at \$6.3 Billion. DeVos acquired his wealth through the pyramid scheme of Amway, making billions off the work of others. DeVos has also increased and maintained his wealth by influencing public policy around workers rights, tax breaks and supporting political candidates that zealously defend Neo-liberal capitalism at both the national and state level.

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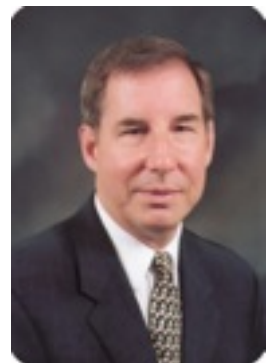
3. Edward Frey - Edward Frey was the former President and Chairman of the Union Bank in Grand Rapids and made his wealth from other people's money. Frey also functioned as the chairman of the board of Foremost Insurance Company and began his family foundation, the Frey Foundation. For years the Frey Foundation has contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Right Place Inc., Michigan Future Inc., the West Michigan Strategic Alliance and Grand Action. The Frey family support for Grand Action has led to millions of dollars of public money being used for private projects like the Van Andel Arena, the downtown Grand Rapids convention center and the Downtown Market. Frey was a key player in the local power structure of Grand Rapids and his family continues that legacy.



4. Paul Henry - Paul Henry was a former Congressman from West Michigan who was a member of Congress from the early 1980s through 1993. During the Reagan/Bush years, Congressman Henry was a loyal supporter of the US counter-insurgency wars in Central America and consistently voted for funding the terrorist forces known as the Contras, which were fighting the Nicaraguan government. There was a lively campaign in Grand Rapids against Congressman Henry and his support for such wars, with numerous actions and people being arrested in his office on several occasions.



5. Mark Murray - Mark Murray is a former President of GVSU. Murray was also part of the Engler Administration in Michigan prior to coming to GVSU. After his tenure at GVSU, Murray went to work for the Meijer Corporation as CEO. Murray has consistently made his wealth from the labor of others or from taxpayers. Murray has acted as an apologist for power. While at GVSU, when faculty and staff were attempting to win domestic partner benefits, Murray sided with wealthy donors who were opposed to such a policy. Murray stated at the time, "As a University that has benefited from very generous support from the private philanthropic community, we must recognize the prevailing views of those who provide such support."

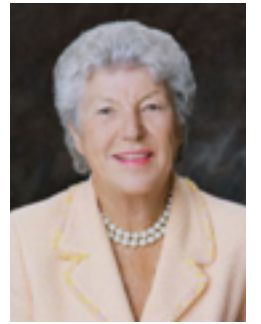


6. Seymour Padnos - Padnos served as Chairman of the Louis Padnos Iron and Metal Co, where he made his wealth off the labor of others and by polluting the environment.



**Fight the Academic Industrial Complex!**

7. Mary Idema Pew - Mary was married to Robert Pew, who was the head of the office furniture giant Steelcase and served as chairman of the board at Steelcase for 25 years. Pew made millions off the labor of Steelcase workers and then used that money to support business interests throughout the area by serving on the Michigan Chamber of Commerce. In the 1990s, Forbes magazine listed the Pew family as among the top 25 wealthiest in the country. Like most wealthy people, Pew served on numerous corporate boards and was also a member of the Grand Valley State Colleges Citizen's Council, providing him with an opportunity to influence policy at GVSU particularly as it related to economic policy in West Michigan. After the premier screening of the film, A Grand Rapids People's History of the LGBTQ Community, threats were made against the filmmakers to remove comments in the film that pointed out that a member of the Pew family fired the then director of the Grand Rapids Art Museum because he had just owned a gay cafe/bookstore. The university said that this was unacceptable since in 2011 the university was building a new library named after a member of the Pew family.



**CENSORSHIP**  
**PROTECTING YOU**  
**FROM REALITY**

8. Robert Pew - See description above

9. William Seidman - William Seidman made his money by exploiting people through his family's accounting business, known as BDO Seidman. Seidman was also an economic advisor for Presidents Ford, Reagan and George H. W. Bush, meaning he was an architect for Neo-Liberal Capitalism. In addition, Seidman was the chairman of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) and is credited with providing "stability" for the banking industry, because the banks "are too big to fail." This sentiment really means that the banking system is too important to systems of power and are necessary for the transfer of wealth from working people to the business class. Seidman has near sainthood status, which is why the new business school was named after him.



10. Russel Kirkhof - Russel Kirkhof made his wealth off the labor of workers at his Kirkhof Electrical Company, the Kirkhof Manufacturing Company, taxpayer funded military contracts and by owning stock in the Rospatch Corporation.



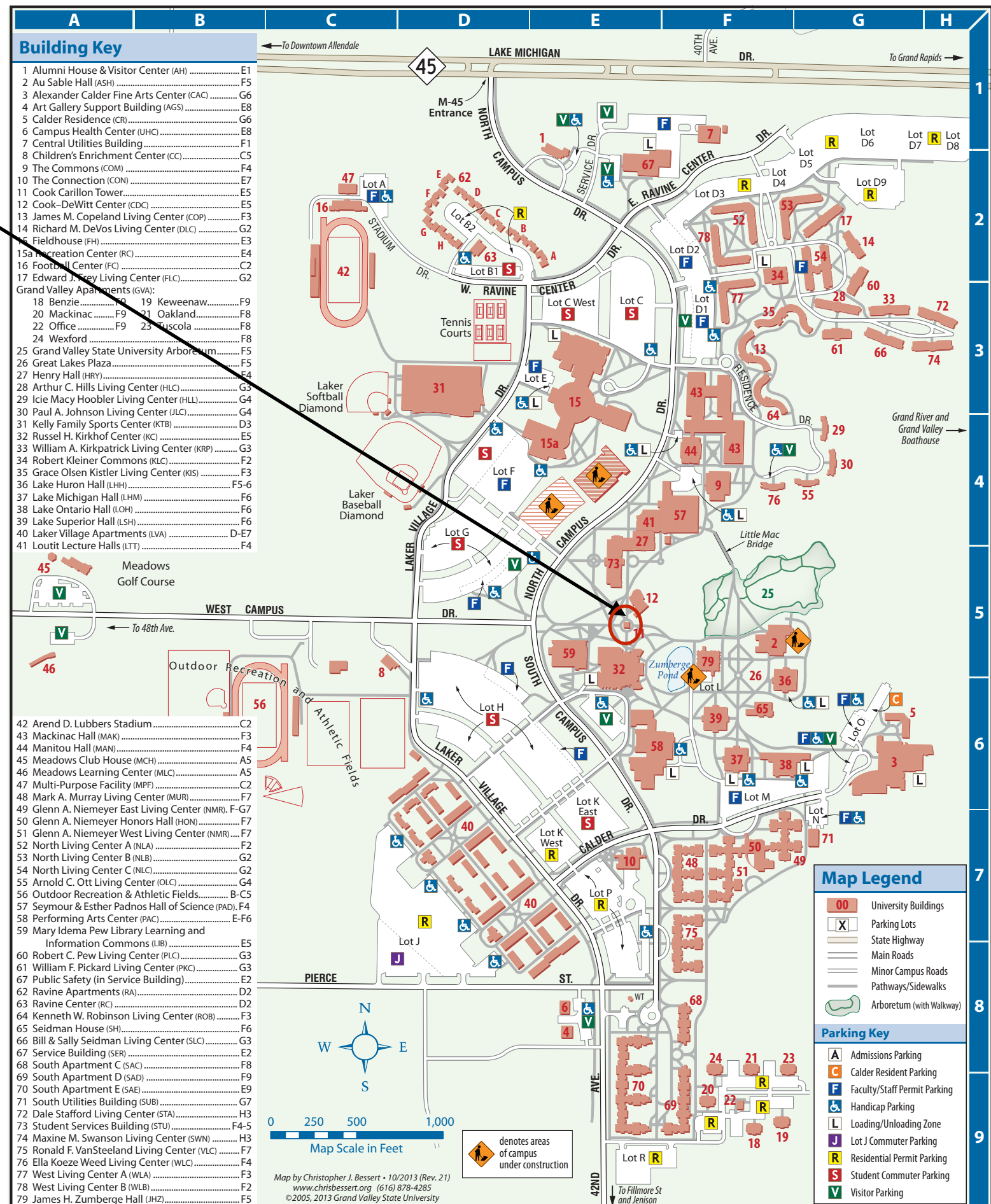


Places on campus  
you are told you  
have free speech.

around the clock  
tower???

Fuck That!  
Fight Against  
Censorship on  
Campus.

Fight Against the  
power and influence  
of wealthy donors!



# Interlocking systems of power

## **Right Place Inc**

Birgit Klohs (ED)  
Doug DeVos  
Sam Cummings  
Dan Gaydou  
Michelle VanDyke  
John Kennedy  
Thomas Haas  
Rick Baker

Michael VanGessel  
Brian Harris

## **Van Andel Institute**

David Van Andel  
John Kennedy  
Michael Jandernoa  
Michelle VanDyke  
Sam Cummings  
Dick DeVos  
Dan Gaydou

## **Grand Action**

Dick DeVos  
David Frey  
Michael Jandernoa  
Birgit Klohs  
Michelle VanDyke  
Carol Van Andel

## **Econ Club of GR**

Rick Baker  
Jeff Connolley  
Sam Cummings  
Dan Gaydou  
Brian Harris  
Jim Dunlap  
Michael VanGessel

## **One Kent Coalition**

Dick DeVos  
Peter Seechia  
David Frey  
Jared Rodriguez

## **Acton Institute**

John Kennedy  
JC Huizenga  
Elsa Prince Broekhuizen  
John Gordon

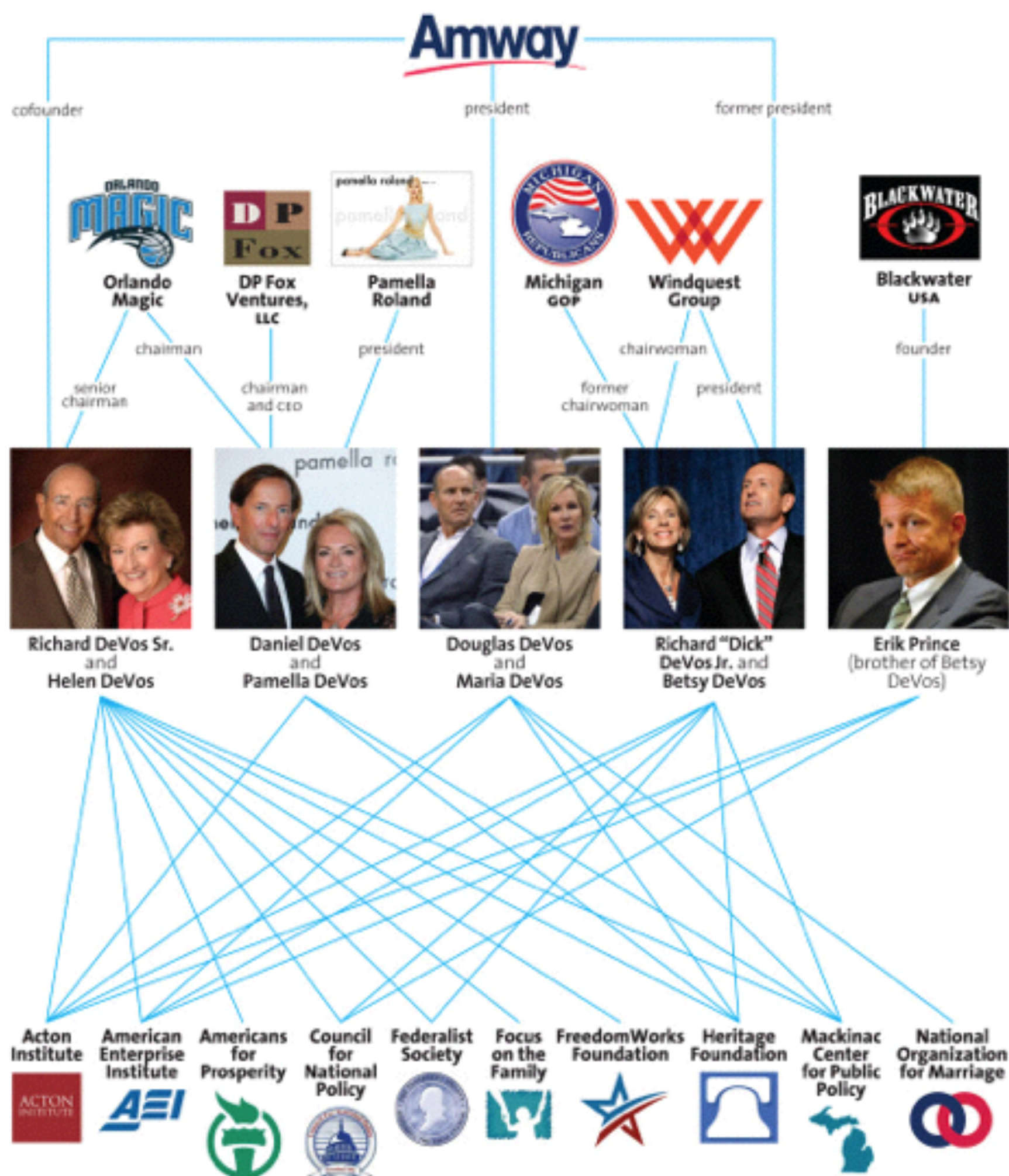
## **GR Chamber of Commerce**

Rick Baker (Pres)  
Birgit Klohs  
Mike Mraz  
Thomas Haas  
Jeff Connolley

## **West MI Policy Forum Board**

Doug DeVos  
Peter Seechia  
Rick Baker  
JC Huizenga  
Micheal Jandernoa  
Jeff Connolley  
Jared Rodriguez  
Jim Dunlap





# Sources

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A Grand Rapids People's History of the LGBTQ Community (film)

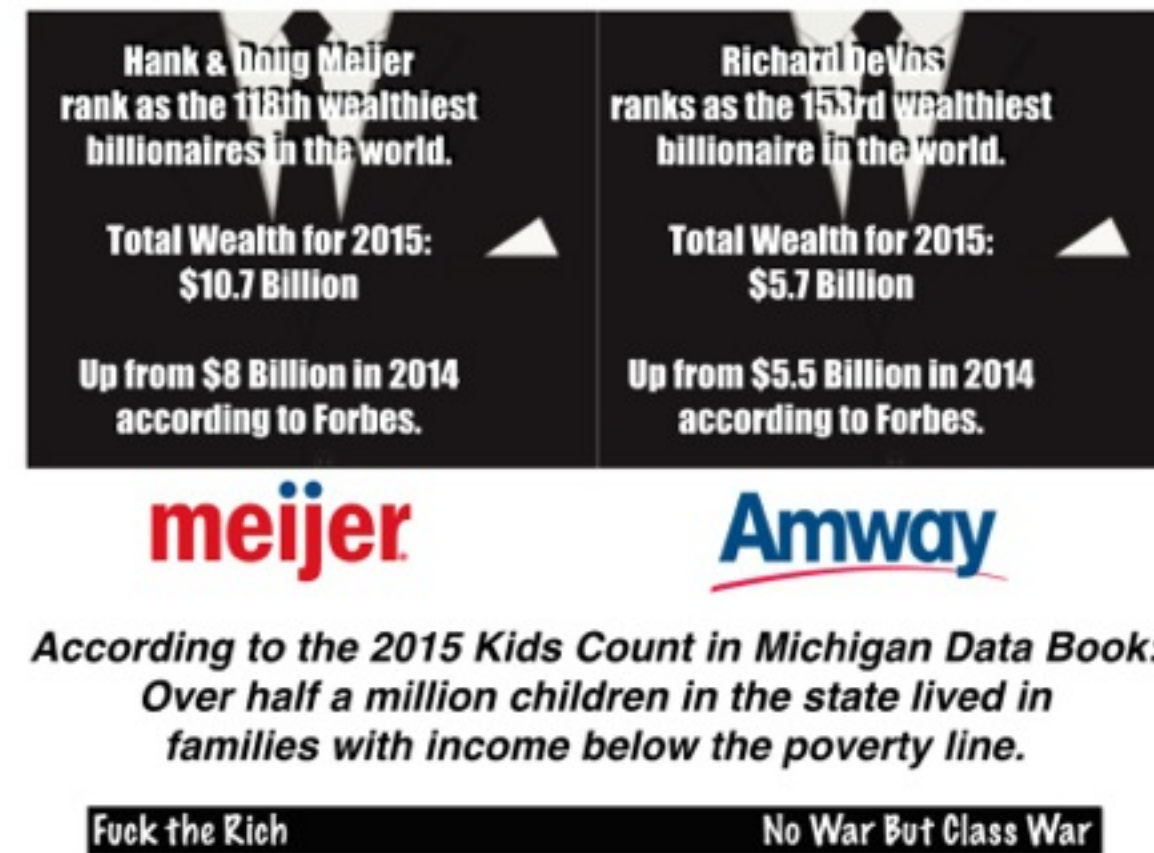
<https://vimeo.com/33274790>

A Grand Rapids People's History of the LGBTQ Community (Archives)

<http://grandrapidslgbthistory.org/>

Grand Rapids People's History Project

<http://grpeopleshistory.org/>



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