

The Rosalie Thorne McKenna Foundation Case Study: Creating a Legacy

Background

Rosalie “Rollie” Thorne McKenna (1918-2003) was one of the 20th century’s most prolific photographers, producing iconic images of poets, writers, artists, and other leading public figures. Among her portrait subjects were Sylvia Plath, Leonard Bernstein, Truman Capote, Ezra Pound, Eudora Welty, Dylan Thomas, Alexander Calder, and Helen Keller.

In the course of her long career, Rollie kept meticulous records of her artistic process and business. The resulting archive upon her death filled three large storage rooms. Despite her inherited wealth and stated wish to establish a foundation to preserve her art and provide opportunities for young photographers, her estate plan proved inadequate to carry out her wishes. Two years after her death, her legacy remained neglected and uncatalogued in a warehouse outside of Boston.

Daniel “Dan” W. Jones, Rollie’s lifelong friend and artistic collaborator, turned to Hemenway & Barnes (H&B) for help. When the H&B team of attorneys, estate administrators, and philanthropic and art advisors met with Dan, there had been no progress on settling her estate or establishing of her foundation. Moreover, Dan was the only person who knew Rollie well enough to ensure that her vision was carried out — and he was in his mid-80s.

Approach

The first step was to probate Rollie’s will and have Dan appointed as executor so that the estate could be properly administered. Further court proceedings were necessary to obtain approval to establish and fund the Foundation. The team commissioned a full inventory of Rollie’s photographic works and artist archives, which included the collection of 19th Century

Photographer Harriet Van Schoonhoven Thorne, Rollie’s great-grandmother. The team filed proper estate tax returns, and secured the necessary tax and probate court approvals. The Rosalie Thorne McKenna Foundation, a tax-exempt private foundation, was established, with Dan and H&B attorneys appointed as co-trustees.

The H&B team worked with Dan to assign all the artistic and intellectual property as well as the financial assets of the McKenna estate to the Foundation. Once the Foundation was funded and subject to the IRS distribution rules, the team carefully developed the foundation’s grantmaking plan, funded with artistic property and cash grants.

At that point, the team turned to the question of what to do with the art to continue Rollie’s legacy. After extensive research, the team approached the Center for Creative Photography (CCP), an internationally recognized archive and research center founded in 1975 by the photographer Ansel Adams at the University of Arizona. The CCP’s curators visited Boston to review the collection and meet the trustees. The H&B team then visited Tucson to assess the CCP’s readiness to accept the archive and partner with the Foundation. The CCP’s strong reputation as an artist’s archive, coupled with its location at a public research university and its ability to manage copyright and reproduction requests, made the CCP a perfect match for the Foundation’s goals and mission to promote Rollie’s legacy as well as cultivate a new generation of photographers. A carefully crafted gift agreement documented the partnership.

Further, the team researched possible gift prospects for the Harriet VS Thorne collection of rare, original glass-plate negatives along with modern prints made from the negatives. Because both artists had lived and worked in

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Connecticut, the H&B team initiated conversations with the then Connecticut Historical Society (the Society) (now the Connecticut Museum of Culture and History). Following the team's visit to the Society to meet the curators and archivists and tour the storage and exhibition facilities, the Foundation donated more than 100 photographs by Rollie McKenna and 200 glass-plate negatives and prints by Harriet VS Thorne to the Society. The uncertainty surrounding the provenance of the Thorne works required the team to take extra care with the copyright agreements. The gift also included a cash grant to provide funds for digitizing the materials which became part of the Society's Museum, extending the reach of the collection beyond those who can visit Hartford, CT. The Society also mounted an exhibit featuring the Thorne/McKenna photographs in 2013. [See the collection here.](#)

These exhibitions and archival projects, plus additional research by Dan and the H&B team, led to a subsequent partnership with the then Stonington (CT) Historical Society (now Historic Stonington). Rollie's studio was in Stonington in the later years of her life, where she documented life in Stonington and her family and friends. After meetings with Dan, the Foundation, and Historic Stonington's curators and archivists, the Foundation made a gift of Rollie's remaining archive, which included photographs, correspondence, cameras, and her iconic film *Days of Dylan Thomas*, to Historic Stonington. The Foundation's partnership with the Historic Stonington included funding a Rollie McKenna Photography Contest, a 2018 exhibit *A Village Love Affair*, and a feature length documentary film featuring the photographer's work being released in 2026.

The final partnership that helped the Foundation cement Rollie's legacy is with her alma mater Vassar College. In 2023, when the newly hired curator of photography at The Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center at Vassar College was hired, she discovered that Rollie was the most collected of all the artists in

the Loeb's collection. She set to work researching Rollie's career, resulting in the exhibit *Making a Life in Photography* in 2024. It was the first deep academic research completed on the photographer, and set the stage for a traveling exhibit which opened at the CCP in January 2026. Rollie's work had come full circle.

Results

Although Rollie's will indicated her intention to preserve her artwork for charitable purposes, her photographs could easily have languished indefinitely — or suffered a worse fate — had it not been for the persistence of her close friend Dan, with support from the attorneys, estate administrators, and philanthropic and art advisors at H&B. Working together with the CCP, Vassar College and several other organizations who are recipients of Rollie's work, the Foundation has been able to protect her legacy and give her career the attention it deserved.

Today Rollie's works are accessible and widely recognized. In addition, gifts to the CCP, Connecticut Historical Society, Stonington Historical Society, and Vassar College will allow a new generation of students, artists, scholars, and community members to appreciate her work. We look forward to continuing to support the Foundation's grant-making and partnerships to continue Rollie's artistic and charitable legacy.

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