As many reflect on a year of living with COVID-19, I know we are all asking one question: “Will this year be better than last?”

Our commitment to connecting supportive donors and historical assets with community need has been challenged over the past year as never before. “Pandemic impact” is just two words, but the distress and need experienced by many in our two counties continues. And our work with nonprofit and other community partners will, too.

As devastating as things have been for those dealing with illness and death, economic uncertainty, and so many other ill effects, it’s important to look ahead—not just to recovery, but to the bright future this community was pursuing before COVID-19 became a household word. All of us at the Community Foundation are confident that the many positives in our community, some of them just beginning to be realized, were only delayed. And we all need to begin planning for that bright future.

With more encouraging news on the vaccination front in the national news just about every day, we continue to address community impact. It’s no secret that even though getting more people vaccinated remains a priority, the pandemic’s effects will be with us for some time to come. A few highlights of our response and involvement to date:

• Community Foundation’s joint effort with United Way of the Mohawk Valley continues, with more than 70 organizations receiving well over $1 million from the fund in the last year. Additional support is always welcome, see mvcovidfund.com for more information.

• With nonprofit partners, we’ve made it a priority to reach out to high-needs neighborhood residents to educate them about the availability and benefits of the vaccine.

• Served on NYS task forces aimed at organizing the vaccination effort and ensuring equitable distribution, connecting Albany’s strategy with the Community Foundation’s equity initiative work. Establishing a “pop-up” vaccination site at Utica’s Tabernacle Baptist Church was a great example.

Engaging with marginalized populations as part of the pandemic effort has complemented and overlapped with our equity initiative work, which continues to advance. A broad and diverse community equity advisory group has been working hard for months, examining priority issues such as education, job readiness, income and wealth, criminal justice and safety, quality of life and neighborhoods, housing, health, community equity awareness, and local government resource distribution and political empowerment. The group’s charge is to provide community voice to the 10-year, $10 million initial commitment to advance our community toward “opportunity for all,” our vision for Herkimer and Oneida counties.

And as you’ll see in this issue, the signs are everywhere: this year, through all our efforts, will truly be better and brighter than last.

Alicia Dicks
President/CEO
The Community Foundation of Herkimer and Oneida Counties
Sometimes it’s the smallest things in life that mean the most. Having comfort and peace of mind when experiencing hardship is something that for many, means the absolute world. In the eyes of those located in and around Camden, Cluster 13 is a saving grace, helping hundreds of families and individuals overcome life’s challenges for the last three decades.

Its memorable name stems from the number of churches and ministries that came together to form the organization back in 2001. With a focus on essential human services and helping residents stay in their own homes, Cluster 13 exists to assist the needy and improve the quality of life for many by providing a wide range of services and resources.

Staffed by volunteers, Cluster 13’s Clothing Connection sells high-quality used clothing at low prices. For Leslie Coe, Cluster 13’s board chair, the greatest value of the retail service is seeing others find the perfect clothing item for special events. Clothing is donated to the store by the community, with proceeds directly supporting the organization’s programs.

“Our selection of high-quality used clothing is diverse,” says Coe. “For example, we have prom dresses and wedding dresses for less than ten dollars. Those who may not have a nice dress for big events in their lives can purchase these second-hand clothing items in excellent used condition and feel proud of what they have, which truly embodies the purpose of the store.”

In addition to providing clothing, Cluster 13’s housing ministries program helps the Camden community with general home repairs and renovations, including plumbing, electrical work, roofing and accessibility. The organization relies on volunteers and local groups to perform the work, a challenge in a world adapting to pandemic impact.

“The biggest challenge has been the decrease in volunteers,” Coe says. “However, we have been able to overcome those obstacles and maintain our programs and services, reopening our Clothing Connection store that was previously closed due to COVID, for example. We are fortunate to still serve our community in the same capacity as before.”

Cluster 13 also partners with other organizations to extend its mission. The organization’s building located on Main Street in Camden houses the Camden Area Food Pantry, providing food for those in need. Currently, the food pantry operates by appointment only with curbside delivery, ensuring minimal contact for volunteers and recipients.

In the warmer months, Cluster 13 finds great opportunity in its “Cluster of Produce” program which has received support from the Mele Family Fund of the Community Foundation. In 2014, the organization created a community garden as a healthy and rewarding activity for young people and families. Volunteers grow fruits and vegetables for the organization, supplying the pantry with the
garden’s bounty. In addition to volunteering to tend the garden, community members can sponsor garden plots or donate tools and supplies to support the project. And pantry customers can get other help as well.

“When we conduct interviews at the pantry to assess individual needs, we ask if there are any other services and information that they would like,” says Coe. “We are able to share phone numbers and contact information of other organizations. It allows for more people to know about all the available resources in this area.”

Heartfelt Helping Hands is Cluster 13’s local and national directory of services that extend beyond those of the organization, including transportation to medical appointments, child welfare, employment, and mental health services. Providing a full range of resources to support the community furthers the organization’s goal of keeping residents safe in all ways.

Since 2016, Cluster 13 has received more than $45,000 in funding from the Community Foundation to assist with building and operational expenses. The support has sustained the organization considerably, Coe says.

As strong as the community they serve, Cluster 13 has an endless role of turning hardship into hope and lending a helping hand to those in need. There to assist in various ways, the organization is committed to providing helpful services and living out its mission day after day.
We’ve come to think of some of our work as a series of “initiatives,” things that we’ve introduced or started, but the growing number of major projects are much more than the word’s definition suggests. Over time, they are the major organizing focus that guides much of our total investment in the community. In this issue, we highlight the Community Foundation’s current roster of initiatives, starting with the newest—our commitment to equity.

Probably no other undertaking at the Community Foundation in all its 70-year history will touch as many lives in our two counties as the $10 million, 10-year commitment to Community Equity approved by the Board of Trustees in 2020.

Given the events of the last year, and the continuing national conversation surrounding race, the starting emphasis of our “equity” initiative is clearly racial equity and social justice—but this commitment will grow and expand beyond race alone, since ours is a community of great diversity. As the Community Foundation vision says, we are working toward a “vibrant region with opportunity for all,” so our equity efforts must include all residents, especially the historically oppressed, underserved and most vulnerable.

On that note, to ensure equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines to the underserved in our community, the Community Foundation has partnered with a coalition of local nonprofit organizations, led by The Center to embark on a Community Navigator Program. Through door-to-door efforts and outreach events, these “navigators” will reach our most diverse neighborhoods, providing them with information regarding the vaccine. This effort was supported financially by the Ronald & Sheila Cuccaro Family Fund and the Mohawk Valley COVID-19 Response Fund.

Some municipalities, some neighborhoods, are more diverse than others. But this initiative is not just for Utica, or Utica and Rome. Because advancing equity holds promise and opportunity for everyone in our two counties.
To begin with racial equity, we have already engaged with individuals and organizations eager to take part in this work. Several of them have volunteered their time to form an advisory group, so that diverse community voices are heard in the coming discussions concerning equity investments in the community.

The group is led by Jawwaad Rasheed, the recently retired Oneida County Family Court Magistrate and, as of June, Chair of the Community Foundation Board of Trustees. He has been actively involved in the nonprofit community for many years, volunteering with the Mohawk Valley Frontiers and Junior Frontiers.

Initially, the group will provide valuable perspective as the Community Foundation channels equity-related investments to nonprofit organizations that can achieve short- and long-term results; programs and services that will improve the quality of life for those in need, lift barriers to success for the struggling, and advance opportunity for all who live and work here.

“Given the Community Foundation’s multiyear commitment, the advisory group’s longer-term work will likely see it change and evolve,” said Alicia Dicks, president/CEO. “It could, for example, determine equity work would best be advanced by either a new or some existing nonprofit organization—and then work to form that new group, or support an organization already in existence, one ready to take on the community’s continuing equity commitment.”

In addition to its volunteer members, the advisory group’s work for much of this year will be supported by Olivia Paul, hired by the Community Foundation to serve as an engagement specialist.

EQUITY ADVISORY GROUP

A new and diverse group of community leaders has come together to give voice to challenges and potential solutions related to longstanding inequity in our community. As a result of the Community Foundation’s launch of a 10-year commitment to working toward racial equity and social justice, the Equity Initiative Advisory Group is working to assess regional and neighborhood needs and recommend ways to meet them.

Dr. Anthony Baird, Vice President for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion/Chief Diversity Officer, Utica College

Rev. Sharon Baugh, Pastor, Hope Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church

Charles Green, CEO, Assured Information Security, Inc.

Hilda M. Jordan, Paralegal and Junior Frontiers Alumni Impact Collective Chair

Kay Klo, Assistant Director, Midtown Utica Community Center

Tim Kroecker, Senior Operations Research Analyst, Air Force Research Lab - Information Directorate

Delvin Moody, Utica Common Councilmember

Marques Phillips, City of Utica Codes Commissioner and Director of Community Initiatives

Rick Short, Corporate Associate Vice President, Indium Corporation

Randy VanWagoner, President, Mohawk Valley Community College

Help Create a Vibrant Region with Opportunity for All

Building on our commitment to equity, the Community Foundation launched the Mohawk Valley Equity Pledge to get community residents and organizations to demonstrate their support for the advancement of racial equity and social justice. Together, we will encourage diversity, challenge injustice and help build opportunity for all. Taking the MV Equity Pledge is a great first step to becoming part of this important community effort. Join us today by visiting mvequitypledge.org.
LEAD-FREE MOHAWK VALLEY
Equity is our newest initiative, and it will overlap with and complement our longest-standing—five years and counting—commitment to combat childhood lead poisoning. The Lead-Free Mohawk Valley coalition headquartered at Utica’s HomeOwnershipCenter continues to make more residential properties—especially in targeted neighborhoods—lead-safe. The Community Foundation’s work with the coalition was instrumental in the City of Utica securing federal funding to ramp up and enhance a truly multi-partner effort. Despite pandemic-caused delays, that funding and other leveraged investments are helping to address the continuing public health challenge.

DOWNTOWN UTICA PARTNERSHIP
Like Lead-Free MV, our other initiatives share certain objectives with equity efforts. Although each was started for a separate purpose, all contribute to and benefit from the equity-focused “opportunity for all” vision. The Downtown Utica Partnership, for example, grew from our work with the City of Utica to secure state revitalization funding and develop a strategic vision, and our early and substantial support for a new medical center campus. These components plus an equity focus inform our continuing effort to build a public-private collaboration that will support and enhance Downtown’s future.

HERKIMER COUNTY COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
Also in the government partnership category, but with broader geographic goals, the Herkimer County Community Development initiative brought together many willing local government partners—county, town and village—to develop a focused, purposeful Herkimer County strategy for continued economic and quality of life enhancement. With Community Foundation support, in partnership with Herkimer County government and virtually every town and village in the county, this united effort is the first venture of its kind. The overarching goal is to enhance future success from the county’s full range of cultural, economic and recreational resources that current residents and visitors know and enjoy.
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

From the smallest startup café to the largest newcomer—like Cree—Workforce Development’s importance can hardly be overstated. That’s why the Community Foundation continues to partner with Mohawk Valley Economic Development Growth Enterprises (MV EDGE), supporting effective emerging and existing workforce recruitment and retention programs, tools and strategies. And, yes, this initiative is just one more example of how our work is increasingly integrated; career opportunities for newly minted area graduates, jobs for those seeking advancement and life improvement—all these and other opportunities come together under a commitment that, again, finds common ground with equity and our other initiatives.

OVER TIME, THE INITIATIVES SUMMARIZED HERE WILL EVOLVE; AND OTHERS WILL BE LAUNCHED AS WE STRIVE TO MEET CHANGING COMMUNITY NEEDS WITH FOCUSED INVESTMENTS. YOU CAN ALWAYS LEARN THE LATEST ABOUT OUR WORK ON OUR WEBSITE, FOUNDATIONHOC.ORG.
INNOVATIVE
partnerships & investments

THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION IS MAKING AN IMPACT IN ALL CORNERS OF OUR COMMUNITY.

4PETSAKE FOOD PANTRY | $1,100
Support from the Staffworks Fund and the Christopher and Deborah McGrath Family Fund for the organization’s pet food giveaway.

CORNERSTONE COMMUNITY CHURCH | $61,500
Grants from the Mandour Fund and the Community Foundation to support the Morrow Warming Center’s overnight services and food for the homeless.

DOLGEVILLE FORWARD | $10,000
A grant to support renovations of Center Park in Dolgeville that include a new pavilion, kitchen, basketball court and splash pad.

ERWIN LIBRARY | $2,380
Funding to assist with the purchase of laptops and Chromebooks to enable patrons to socially distance while using technology.

NEIGHBORHOOD CENTER | $74,000
Support from the Community Foundation and the M&T Bank/Partners Trust Bank Charitable Fund to help the Utica Police Department and the Neighborhood Center’s Mobile Crisis Assessment Team respond to mental health calls in Utica.

OLD FORGE VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT | $15,000
A grant from the Adirondack League Club Community Fund to help purchase a new rescue truck.

REBUILDING CENTRAL NEW YORK | $25,000
Funding for the Handy Helpers Program that provides home repair services to low-income aging-in-place senior, disabled, and veteran homeowners.

ROME RESCUE MISSION | $12,000
A grant from the Mele Family Fund for food baskets to be distributed through the Mobile Mission.
Describe your role and what projects and work you are involved in.

Basically, I’m responsible for all things finance and accounting! Financial reporting and analysis, budgeting, financial statements, the IRS Form 990, donor statements, cash management, investment pools, strategy, spending policy, and more.

Tell us about your professional history and how you came to work at the Community Foundation:

I went to Siena College and interned at a local accounting firm. After I graduated with a bachelor’s in business administration with a concentration in accounting, my first job was at PricewaterhouseCoopers, LLP, one of what used to be called the “Big Four” public accounting firms. Since then I’ve worked in financial and operational accounting and auditing for more than 20 years at Oneida Savings Bank, Oneida Financial Corporation, Hamilton College, Cazenovia College, Morrisville Auxiliary Corporation, and Morrisville College Foundation. And while working, I earned an MBA in Professional Accountancy from Utica College and two professional designations, Certified Public Accountant and Certified Internal Auditor.

What is your favorite part of your role at the Community Foundation?

What I like best is that I get to be a part of an amazing, collaborative team! Of course, I really enjoy the financial reporting and analysis, but some of my favorite moments are when our team shares feedback of how funding has positively impacted the community. And, before the pandemic, when we presented Community Choice Awards as a team on a “prize patrol” bus, it was great to deliver the funding to the nonprofit organizations and see how their work makes such a difference.

What do you think is unique about the Community Foundation’s model of investment?

After being a traditional grantmaker for most of our history, this year we’re rolling out a new way of thinking about how we get funding to nonprofit organizations that need it to help the community. We call it “inquiry to investment;” and it includes all the “inquiring” that goes on—between nonprofits asking for assistance and us, between us and donors and fundholders . . . plus the process that takes us from those conversations to the “investment,” the millions of dollars we put into the community each year through our partners. We want the process to be less about just filling out a form and more about building relationships—so we can make more meaningful investments in the community that have greater impact than ever before.

How has the field of finance for nonprofits changed in a world impacted by COVID-19?

From a financial standpoint I think it has just emphasized the increasing level of community need. As financial professionals, we have been tasked to get creative and think outside the box in terms of how we can respond to and meet the growing needs of our nonprofit partners and sustain our own operations so we can meet those needs. It’s been challenging, but we’re seeing results and are hoping that better times are ahead.

What is a fact about you that people would be surprised to know?

I am a huge fan of Marvel and Star Wars!

What do you enjoy doing outside of the office?

When I am not working, I enjoy spending time with my husband, Lance, our children, Ryan, Reilly, Emersyn, Braiden, and our dog Ritzy. We love to travel to the ocean during warmer weather. I like to be active and outside, and on weekends you can usually find us hiking a trail or even a mountain. One of my favorite things to do is go for a run. I really miss running road races, the competition and camaraderie, and I look forward to working to beat my own PR (personal record) in the Boilermaker again soon!
Sonia Martinez and Tony Colon cofounded the Mohawk Valley Latino Association (MVLA) in 2003, working with likeminded community members to create an organization with a mission and vision to educate and empower the area's Latino community.

“We started the organization, as Tony likes to say, at my kitchen table,” said Martinez.

Martinez was born in the Dominican Republic and came to the United States at age 13 with her father and two siblings in search of a better life. She didn’t speak English, but learned quickly. From an early age, she understood the language barrier that most immigrants face when they come to America—and the continuing need for education as a path to success.

“With education comes better skills, better social skills, life skills, and a future for our children,” Martinez says. “It’s important that our community feels empowered, that they see themselves in the community, to feel a part of the community and to feel that whatever they set their mind to they can do it. Just like I did.”

For almost 18 years, MVLA has focused on providing services to the Latino community to enhance their quality of life. The organization helps newly arrived families with the language barrier, employment, housing, food, social service benefits, healthcare and even citizenship. MVLA lets people know what’s going on in the community and keeps them informed about how they can overcome challenges, helping them become better people and better community members.

As it has for everyone in the community, the global pandemic has taken its toll on local Latinos, with many businesses closed and jobs lost. The biggest needs now are food insecurity, rent assistance and health issues.

“A lot of people have had to stay home. Not knowing what to do or where to go if they start having COVID-19 symptoms,” says Martinez. “Throughout the last few months, the challenge has shifted to vaccine education and helping vulnerable populations sign up for the vaccine.”

To address these rising emergency needs, MVLA and First Circle have launched La Abundancia, a planned communal space and garden in the Cornhill neighborhood. This project will be a place where people can grow healthy food, cook, eat, find community support, and celebrate community and tradition together. Along with helping people of all ages, La Abundancia will pay special attention to engaging and supporting people of color as everyone adapts to a society emerging from the pandemic.

Martinez has always adapted to make the future of the organization brighter, and the Community Foundation has helped. MVLA has been awarded more than $40,000 to support organizational needs and purchase supplies, including personal protective equipment. With a rapid increase in the number of families needing assistance, the funding will also help vulnerable residents—especially those facing greater challenges because of COVID-19, ensuring that nobody is left behind during the pandemic.
COVID-19 forced the organization to go virtual; in January, MVLA hosted an Upstate Latino Summit workshop via Zoom. The event focused on community advocacy and engagement, encouraging participants to get involved in issues and causes important to them. A follow-up virtual workshop focused on immigration, with migrant advocates and attorneys updating attendees on the status of immigration reform, occurred in March.

MVLA also received Community Foundation funding to help victims of the Puerto Rico earthquakes find a place to live, rent assistance, and basic necessities like food and furniture. “It’s been amazing,” Martinez says. “When I envision what I want MVLA to be, it’s a welcoming center for new families that feel like they’re not getting the help in their own country. They come here and it’s amazing to them. I have so many families that have shed tears of thanks and happiness. We still strive to continue to have those kinds of moments with new families.”

Martinez says the families MVLA has helped over the years are the reason she goes to work every day, especially the impact the organization can have on their lives. “There was this one young couple that came here, and every time I think about it, I shed a tear. They came here with nothing and now they have a beautiful baby that they’re raising in Utica in a beautiful apartment.”

And then there was the mother and young son who arrived from the Dominican Republic years ago. Martinez helped them find a place to live. Time passed, and the little boy graduated from the police academy—becoming Utica’s first officer from the Dominican Republic. And he made sure Martinez was at the graduation ceremony.

“His mother and I, we cried so much because he was such a shy little boy, and to see him in a uniform was amazing,” Martinez recalls. “Whenever he sees me, he gives me a hug and a ‘thank you.’ He says, ‘I’m here because of you.’”

After nearly 20 years and countless stories like these, MVLA continues to empower and educate families in need and provide the tools the Mohawk Valley’s growing Latino community needs to succeed.
4 ELEMENTS STUDIO CAPITAL AND FOUNDATION FUNDS
Agency funds established by 4 Elements Studio, a community arts center dedicated to engaging and educating the community through a range of artistic experiences and programming.

ANITA A. VITULLO FUND FOR MOHAWK VALLEY HEALTH SYSTEM
A designated fund established by Mohawk Valley Health System, an integrated healthcare delivery system serving Oneida, Herkimer and Madison counties, to administer a new gift from Anita A. Vitullo.

ANITA A. VITULLO FUND FOR SUSQUEHANNA SPCA
A designated fund established by Susquehanna SPCA, a nonprofit organization dedicated to alleviating the suffering of animals throughout Otsego County, to administer a new gift from Anita A. Vitullo.

ANITA'S STEVENS-SWAN HUMANE SOCIETY FUND
A designated fund established by Stevens-Swan Humane Society, a nonprofit organization committed to finding homes for abandoned and abused companion animals from Oneida County and to reduce that animal population through spay and neuter programs, to administer a new gift from Anita A. Vitullo.

ANN & DAVID HARDEN FUND
A field-of-interest fund established by the Ann M. and David E. Harden Foundation, Inc. to support nonprofit organizations that provide for the basic needs of residents of Camden, New York, McConnellsville, New York, and their immediate surrounding communities.

BAMBERGER FAMILY FUND
A donor-advised fund established by Rabbi Henry and Sheila Bamberger for general charitable purposes.

BURRSTONE BASSETT FUND
A donor-advised fund established for general charitable purposes.

COVID-19 COMMUNITY NAVIGATOR PROGRAM FUND
A field-of-interest fund established through a lead gift from the Ronald and Sheila Cuccaro Family Fund to support the COVID-19 Community Navigator Program, an outreach program that promotes awareness and access to COVID-19 vaccinations.

EMPOWERED PATHWAYS WERC/RISE FUND
An agency fund to benefit Empowered Pathways, a nonprofit organization with a focus on providing employment, mediation and advocacy services to women, youth and families in the area.

HERKIMER 9 FOUNDATION FUND
A designated fund to benefit the Herkimer 9 Foundation, a nonprofit organization working to develop a vision and implement a plan to redevelop and revitalize the Village of Herkimer.

HOPE BRADBURY FUND
A donor-advised fund established by Jane Bradbury in memory of her mother, Hope T. Bradbury, for general charitable purposes.

OLD FORGE VOLUNTEER AMBULANCE CORPS – NEW AMBULANCE FUND
An agency fund established by the Old Forge Volunteer Ambulance Corps to raise funds for a new ambulance.

PET WELLNESS FUND
A donor-advised fund established for general charitable purposes.

REVEREND JOHN L. GALLAGHER MEMORIAL FUND
A discretionary fund established in memory of Reverend John L. Gallagher for general charitable purposes.

STANLEY THEATRE CHARITABLE FUND
An agency fund established by the Stanley Theatre to support fundraising activities.
After a lifetime of passionate commitment to community, a remarkable individual can be honored in a way that extends their mission of service to others. The Gabriel, Joseph and Lila Mandour Karam Fund is doing just that—continuing to write the story of an extraordinary individual and his family, his hopes, and his dreams for this community.

Born in 1936, Joseph Karam was the only child of Gabriel and Lila Mandour Karam. A brilliant student, he entered Cornell University at the age of 16, earning a degree in economics—and then, an MBA from Syracuse University. Professionally, he had a wide-ranging career in government and public policy, serving as City of Utica Mayor Dominick Assaro’s chief of staff and eventually contributing to the success of agencies such as the Utica Planning Board, Municipal Housing Authority, Rome Air Development Center, Mohawk Valley Economic Development District, Mohawk Valley EDGE, and the Oneida County Industrial Development Agency.

A renaissance man, Joe had many passions, including singing, acting, and theatrical directing. “Joe and his father Gabe would come over to our house for Sunday dinner every week,” said J.K. Hage, Joe’s cousin. “There was no small talk at the dinner table. There were very spirited conversations about current issues and politics, literature and philosophy, theater. We had a piano in our living room and we would all sing show tunes. There are just so many great memories of him.”

These passions extended into other avenues as well, serving the Players of Utica as a board member, volunteer and in many other capacities and being a founding member of the Mohawk Valley Chamber of Commerce Incubator advisory board.

“Joe was passionate about the dramatic arts and the advancement of technology, but above all, he had a passion for Utica,” Hage says. “Utica was in his bloodstream. He worked all over the world, but something always drew him back. This was his place.”

His love and commitment to this community could not be denied.

Hage recalls, “Joe was one of those people who would say why not? Why can’t we do X, Y or Z? Why can’t it happen? He was one of those people who wanted to be the change not just talk about it.”

After Joe’s passing, family members and long-time friends followed his wishes and created a donor-advised fund at the Community Foundation that would benefit the advancement of the arts and technology, continuing his philanthropic efforts and positive vision for the community. The name of the fund was dedicated to him and his parents. Since 2012 the Gabriel, Joseph and Lila Mandour Karam Fund has awarded nearly $60,000 to Players of Utica, Stanley Center for the Arts, Mohawk Valley Health System, The House of the Good Shepherd, Neighborhood Center and other area nonprofits. The fund’s advisors are all members of Joe’s extended family.

And what would Joe think of his philanthropic legacy? Hage says he would be “tickled pink.”

“He would be thrilled with this,” says Hage. “One of the events sponsored by the fund is the Central New York Regional FIRST Robotics Competition at SUNY Poly, where thousands of high school students come to compete. We thought that was an ideal activity for Joe’s fund to support. I’m sure he would’ve been there at the competition every day. That’s the sort of event he would have loved.”

Whether in politics, literature, philosophy, or theater, Joe Karam made a meaningful and lasting impact on his family and in his community, exuding his passion for giving back to worthwhile causes that shaped all of his endeavors. Larger than life, his vision persists and his passions are fostered through the investments made by the Gabriel, Joseph and Lila Mandour Karam Fund.

“In many ways, Joe is still with us and his legacy continues because of the Community Foundation,” Hage says. “His vision lives on through this fund. It’s a form of immortality that carries on his high ideals and wonderful hopes for our community.”
Developing STRONG LEADERS

Cultivating strong community leadership is integral to building the capacity to lead change. In our community, one organization is committed to equipping innovators, professionals, leaders, and changemakers with the skills and tools they need to navigate the region through complex challenges and opportunities.

The Center for Leadership Excellence (CLE) is dedicated to growth, community, collaboration, and awareness, connecting and inspiring people to work together, take action, and develop current and next-generation community leaders. Its individualized approach incorporates personal growth with preparation to take on community challenges, valuing diversity in cultures and views in its spirit of collaboration.

“Our vision is to have an abundance of diverse civic leaders in the Mohawk Valley equipped to make positive change in our community,” says Kristen Skobla, CLE’s director. “We are committed to serving community, workforce, and corporate leaders, building on and enhancing their existing skills to benefit individuals and their businesses and nonprofit organizations.”

Launched in 2018 as a partnership between Leadership Mohawk Valley (LMV) and Mohawk Valley Community College (MVCC), CLE blends both organizations’ expertise, programs, and resources into an innovative and high-impact program. Each year, CLE works with over 200 participants in its adult and youth leadership programs: Leadership Mohawk Valley, Leadership Academy, Supervisors Institute, Finish Strong for Youth, Disruption Dialogues, Neighborhoods Rising, and a newly launched Board Leadership program.

LMV is a great example of how leadership can be nurtured and developed. Over the course of 10 months, participants investigate local issues, institutions and organizations. Each LMV class gets a behind-the-scenes look at the remarkable work underway across the region and how they can help address significant challenges, all while building personal and professional networks.

In the wake of COVID-19, LMV went virtual. As the first class in nearly 30 years to experience the program on an entirely online platform, this group of professionals have dubbed themselves “virtually the best class.” Participants are using Zoom to speed up networking, separating into one-on-one breakout rooms with more than 60 community leaders to meet and ask questions, an opportunity Skobla says is incredible.

“Seeing current and future local leaders decide where they want to make their mark in the landscape of the Mohawk Valley is inspiring,” she says. “Through the LMV program, they become ambassadors for this community, tackling challenges, opportunities, and learning about how they can leave a legacy behind.”
Beyond LMV, the pandemic also brought new opportunities for the entire CLE to develop connections between people, leaders, and resources. CLE’s Disruption Dialogues not only provides great insight and appreciation for Mohawk Valley organizations, but also common learning for organizations in different sectors to share uncommon experiences. The dialogues are virtual, half-day immersions featuring both local experts and nationally recognized speakers and organizations, including Ben & Jerry’s, Zappos, and MapQuest.

“It’s a great thing to be given an opportunity like this among the hardships that COVID has presented for many organizations,” says Skobla. “It created a chance for us to broaden our reach and navigate a virtual platform, bringing in national speakers that we might not have had the opportunity to include in our framework.”

With support from the Mele Family Fund of The Community Foundation, CLE has also implemented its second cohort of Neighborhoods Rising, an eight-session, three-month program for Black, Latinx, and other diverse current and upcoming community leaders. The program allows individuals to understand the principles of grassroots leadership, recognize and develop strategies to expand social capital and networking, cultivate working relationships with community leaders, identify funding strategies and resources to support community impact initiatives, and create a personal action plan.

“Organizations reach out to us all the time for opportunities to diversify their board leadership. The Black and Latinx leaders in our community really stepped up and served as an advisory group to help us launch this program, and it has been a great way for us to amplify their voices,” says Skobla. “These populations are assets to our evolving community, and we could not have developed this program without them. We are so thankful.”

In addition, with an investment from the M&T Bank/Partners Trust Bank Charitable Fund of the Community Foundation, CLE’s Board Leadership program is in the works. The instructional leadership course prepares participants for board service through an understanding of board governance, best practices of high-performing boards, and nonprofit organizational structure. The all-virtual program will feature MVCC President Randy VanWagoner and a full range of expert speakers from across the state through a partnership with the New York Council of Nonprofits.

In total, CLE has received more than $197,000 from the Community Foundation since its creation, support that Skobla says has been crucial.

“Our work at the Center for Leadership Excellence would not exist without the Community Foundation,“ says Skobla. “And our organizations certainly would not be as impactful without its support.”
TRUSTEE SPOTLIGHT: OUR Dedicated LEADERS

The dedicated leaders that serve on the Community Foundation’s Board of Trustees share a commitment to the organization’s mission. After several years of hard work, thoughtful conversations, and helping to lead innovative initiatives that build a vibrant community for all, two members will complete their service in 2021.

L. MICHAEL FITZGERALD

Elected in 2012, Michael has been a dedicated member of the Board of Trustees. Serving as an officer and a member of several committees and advisory groups, he has been a thoughtful and involved contributor in many of the Community Foundation’s endeavors. Mike has a voice of reason that resonates with many of us and grounds much of the organization’s decision-making. For several years before joining the Board, he was involved as a committee “community representative,” which paved the way for his greater involvement more recently.

“I’ve always thought this was a great place to live, a great community, great place to raise a family. I think it gives you a lot of diversity but it’s still small enough to feel close to the community and keep in touch with them. Being involved with the Community Foundation and taking on these larger initiatives such as racial equity and social justice, food security, education, housing, childcare—all those things that people really need in the community is very rewarding.”

His community board experience also includes roles such as former president and treasurer of the Rescue Mission of Utica, treasurer of the N.E. District of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, president and treasurer of the Utica Industrial Development Corporation, and Chairman of the Board of the Carbone Auto Group.

BURT DANOVITZ

Burt first became involved with the Community Foundation when he was executive director and CEO of the Resource Center for Independent Living (RCIL). The Community Foundation was an RCIL funder and partner, and Burt’s relationship with the Community Foundation evolved over time: first as a community representative on a committee, then in 2012 as a member of the Board of Trustees and a well-informed and thoughtful presence on the Community Investment Committee.

“Since serving on the Board of Trustees, the interest of the Community Foundation has changed from being a grants organization to having a broader impact. This type of impact that deals with large social challenges doesn’t happen quickly, but over time it can transform the communities that we live and work. I know that the Community Foundation is committed to this work for the long haul and I am very hopeful of the outcomes it will bring.”

Our organization has benefitted from Burt’s intellectual and insightful contributions to conversations on projects both large and small. He always has the community’s best interest in mind, making his time with our Board one that we won’t soon forget.
INTRODUCING OUR NEW WEBSITE!

www.foundationhoc.org

If you haven’t visited us online lately you may have missed our fresh new look! For more than a year now, the Community Foundation team has worked with TRAINOR Associates to design and develop a new website that better reflects our brand, is easy to navigate, and resource rich for our donors, fundholders, nonprofit partners, and the general community.

“Basically, we asked ourselves how we could create a one-stop shop for partners. What better way to find out than by listening to nonprofits and fundholders tell us what they’d like to see,” said Nick Grimmer, director of giving strategies. “Unlike many corporate websites, nonprofits don’t have the resources to routinely relaunch websites, so a lot of thought went in to making sure that the website’s new sections and functionality are able to fulfill our partners’ needs now and into the future.”

Visitors can read stories highlighting the generosity of our donors and the impact our investments have throughout the community, learn about partnership opportunities available to nonprofits, and discover new and different ways to become involved with the Community Foundation as a donor or fundholder.

This new website is just the first phase of a larger project that will include the introduction of a fundholder portal, offering capabilities like online support recommendations, gift lists and funding histories.

If you haven’t visited foundationhoc.org recently, please take a moment to check out our new look, and tell us what you think by dropping us a line at info@foundationhoc.org.
The smallest act of generosity can change the trajectory of someone’s life. Often it creates a ripple effect that leaves a legacy of benevolence for years to come. For the late Earl Cunningham, it was one small act of kindness that transformed his life and legacy for the better.

Born in 1930, Earl was raised in a single parent household after the passing of his father. Though he was an exceptional student, after graduating from New Hartford High School in 1948, Earl was not planning on attending college due to financial circumstances.

In August 1948, his high school English teacher informed him that she had secured a scholarship for him to attend Le Moyne College in the fall. And to make ends meet, Earl would hitchhike every weekend from Syracuse to New Hartford where he worked as a waiter and caddy at the Yahnundasis Golf Club.

After earning a business degree and serving in the US Army during the Korean War, Earl began a 35-year career at General Electric, where he negotiated high profile contracts both domestically and internationally. After retiring, he worked part-time as New Hartford village treasurer, retiring in June 2020 after 28 years in that post. Earl passed away in November 2020.

Inspired by their love for education, Earl and his wife, Sara, a former schoolteacher, began mentoring students at Utica’s Thea Bowman House in the 1990s as volunteers, tutoring and reading books to kids after school.

“Earl came faithfully—and often daily—to help teens and pre-teens with some very challenging homework. We all breathed a sigh of relief when Earl walked into the room,” says Jane Domingue, Thea Bowman House executive director. “When we look back at the years of his volunteer work, we could see his influence on future success and college attendance. Earl was especially devoted to the kids that others gave up on. They were the kids who struggled at home and at school. He always found the good in them and wanted to help make college possible for them.”

Students would eagerly flock to Earl and Sara, Domingue recalls. Their patience, attention, and love for children delighted students of all ages. To further accomplish their goal of making higher education possible for students at the Thea Bowman House, the couple established the Cunningham Fund for Thea Bowman House Scholarships at the Community Foundation in 2004. The fund provides scholarships for area high school graduates, especially those of color, who have benefitted from programs at the Thea Bowman House. To date, the fund has awarded $23,200 in scholarships.

“My father was thrilled when he found the Community Foundation as a resource to administer his scholarship fund. I do not think he could have managed it any other way,” said Maureen Cunningham, Earl’s youngest daughter. “Being able to trust the Community Foundation to manage his fund made it possible for him to balance his passion for education with his devotion to his wife.”

In 2015, Sara died after a long battle with Alzheimer’s disease. Earl had taken care of her in their home for years, never wavering in his love, support, and dedication.

Throughout the years, Earl changed the life of dozens of young people he mentored, including Ebony Palmer, a student at Thea Bowman who became like a daughter.

“Earl was always there for me and treated me like his own child. Without him, I would not be where I am today,” says Ebony. “He always believed in me, encouraged me, and was the reason why I was able to graduate college and am now a business owner. He was an inspiration to all for volunteering his time to students and providing resources to help them succeed. To me, he was not just a mentor or a tutor. He became family.”

In addition to education, Earl was an active supporter of many social, environmental, and racial justice causes. At the helm of his philanthropy was a desire to promote the welfare of all.

“Education was a key part of my father’s life. I think that impacted his desire to support others in need and help people,” says Maureen. “He was also a staunch advocate for racial justice. The work he did with the Thea Bowman House was the culmination of all those interests, leading to him creating this fund. As part of his legacy, I would enjoy seeing this fund continue to create opportunities for students to succeed.”

Earl’s story is a perfect example of how one single act of kindness—something as small as a scholarship—can be instrumental in making a difference not only in his life, but in this case, the lives of many.
In April 2021, our community lost an extraordinary and energetic leader whose many commitments to volunteerism included nearly nine years as a member of the Community Foundation Board of Trustees. She was an effective advocate for much of the transformational work happening in Herkimer and Oneida counties, chairing the Mohawk Valley Health System board, serving as a Community Foundation Trustee and committee chair, and being a part of countless other nonprofit boards and committees. Bonnie was always interested in the work that the organization was doing, making her transition to the Board an exciting new path. In fact, in 2020 Bonnie and her husband, Darren, established the Bonnie and Darren Woods Family Fund of the Community Foundation to provide support for various organizations. Those of us who knew Bonnie will remember the energy and optimism that she brought to every interaction.

In addition to her service with our organization, Bonnie was a member of the organizing committee that established Mother Marianne’s West Side Kitchen, which the Community Foundation and its donors have supported over the years.

In one of our last conversations with Bonnie, she reflected on her time as a member of the Board:

“I think what makes up the rich fabric of the Board of Trustees is that everybody comes with their own voice, their own perspective, their own background, their own connections, their own skill, and I think that’s what really weaves us all together in a way that’s pretty powerful. I have loved seeing the growth of the strategic engine that the Community Foundation has become. I love the shift to some of our larger initiatives that are once and for all taking a crack at some of the community’s big opportunities and those take courage, those take focus, they take hard work, and it’s been really something to see that happen.”

Our organization and all those who knew her will forever be grateful for Bonnie’s legacy, love of community, and her friendship and dedication to others.
CONTACT NICK GRIMMER, CFRE, DIRECTOR OF GIVING STRATEGIES, 315-525-6584, NGRIMMER@FOUNDATIONHOC.ORG.

INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?
ONLINE foundationhoc.org
MAIL 2608 Genesee Street, Utica, NY 13502
PHONE 315.735.8212

A copy of our most recently filed financial report is available from the Charities Registry on the New York State Attorney General’s website (www.charitiesnys.com) or, upon request, by contacting the New York State Attorney General, Charities Bureau, 28 Liberty Street, New York, NY 10005, or The Community Foundation of Herkimer & Oneida Counties, 2608 Genesee Street, Utica, NY 13502. You also may obtain information on charitable organizations from the New York State Office of the Attorney General at www.charitiesnys.com or 212.416.8401.

INVEST IN YOUR Community

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Future Fund
Life Insurance

GENERATE AN INCOME
Retirement Plans
Charitable Gift Annuity
Charitable Remainder Trust

AFTER 19 YEARS AT THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION, OUR COWORKER AND FRIEND JAN SQUADRITO HAS RETIRED. HER KNOWLEDGE AND INSIGHT INTO THE NEEDS OF THIS COMMUNITY AND NONPROFITS WAS IMMEASURABLE. SHE WAS THE GATEKEEPER TO THE ORGANIZATION’S GRANTMAKING PROCESS, ENSURING THAT STAFF HAD COMPLETE AND ACCURATE INFORMATION IN ORDER TO MAKE EDUCATED AND INFORMED DECISIONS ON COMMUNITY INVESTMENTS.

JAN ENJOYED GOING OUT INTO THE COMMUNITY, TALKING WITH ORGANIZATIONS, TAKING THE TIME TO LEARN ABOUT OUR PARTNERS AND MAKING THOSE IMPORTANT CONNECTIONS.

“WHAT AN INCREDIBLE MENTOR JAN WAS TO US,” SAID CHARLIE SWEET OF COMPASSION COALITION. “EVEN IN THE EARLY DAYS WHEN WE HAD NO IDEA WHAT WE WERE GETTING INTO, JAN HELPED GUIDE US ALONG THE PATH TO BECOME WHO WE ARE TODAY.”

JAN NOT ONLY SERVED AS A MENTOR TO OUR NON-PROFIT PARTNERS, BUT ALSO HER COWORKERS AT THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION.

“JAN IS A STRONG WOMAN THAT BUILDS OTHERS UP INSTEAD OF TEARING THEM DOWN,” SAID MORGAN MIELNICKI, COMMUNITY INVESTMENT STRATEGIST. “SHE IS TOUGH, AMBITIOUS, A STRONG LISTENER AND I WAS LUCKY TO HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO WORK WITH AND LEARN FROM HER.”

HER DEDICATION TO THE COMMUNITY AND INVOLVEMENT WITH NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS LEAVES A BIG LEGACY THAT CONTINUES TO IMPROVE AND ENHANCE THE LIVES OF MANY. WE WISH HER ALL THE BEST!