



Illinois Prairie Community Foundation: *Connecting People Who Care With*

The vision of a better community keeps their small team going. Executive Director Greg Meyer, Michele and Office Manager Linda Shepherd oversee this local grant-making public charity that covers four counties: McLean, DeWitt, Livingston and Logan. Michele says, “We bring together the financial resources of individuals, families, and businesses to support effective nonprofits in the community. From the initial gifts totaling \$296,900 in Donor Advised Funds, the Foundation’s assets have grown to over \$20 million in 2020. We hold more than 175 funds, which include Donor Advised, Fiscal Sponsorship, Endowments, and Memorial & Scholarship Funds.”

One of their funds, Fostering Dignity, provides backpacks to Department of Children & Family Services to be given to children being removed from their homes. The backpacks provide that child in crisis with something of their own to carry their belongings, instead of having to use a garbage bag. This small gesture offers the child dignity in a time of upheaval.

IPCF has always been steered by small groups of committed people. Starting in 1996, the founders took it upon themselves to create a community foundation for McLean County. According to Michele, “Today, we owe much to the late Carol Reitan, as well as Alan Sender and Drake Zimmerman, for doing considerable research on existing foundations and for taking their message to many community leaders. They persisted and gained enough support to turn their dream into a reality by successfully establishing a nonprofit 501 (c)(3) organization two years later. Bloomington Mayor Judy Markowitz, Normal Mayor Kent Karraker, and McLean County Board Chairperson Gary Riss agreed to serve as the first incorporating board of the Community Foundation of McLean County.”

In April 2004, the Foundation changed its name to its current Illinois Prairie Community Foundation to reflect its



broader reach beyond McLean County. In November 2018, IPCF moved from its longtime location in the Flanagan State Bank building in Bloomington to The Foundry above the Gingerbread House. They share their space with the Shirk Family Foundation.

IPCF is well-known in the community for awarding grants to nonprofits across their four-county region. Each spring, IPCF accepts applications from nonprofits for programs in three categories: General Grants to fund education, environment, health and wellness, and youth, Mirza/ Arts & Culture Grants, and Shulman Jewish Education & Life Grants.

Their Women to Women Giving Circle (W2W) focuses on improving the lives of women and children in the community by awarding grants to local nonprofits and through awareness raising. W2W holds forums throughout the year to educate the public on issues related to their grant focus and to foster “caring conversations.” Such topics have included childhood trauma and resilience, schooling during a pandemic, and food and housing insecurity.

One IPCF fund, Dreams Are Possible, trains women who

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BY ASHLEE SANG

are working hard, but can't make ends meet. The organization provides women with hands-on experience in using various tools, as well as exposure to labor-related programs. Greg explains, "The women can determine whether they want to apply for apprenticeship programs to become plumbers, sheet metal workers, laborers, electricians, or carpenters, or transfer to Heartland Community College's Ready to Work Programs. From there, women can become truck drivers, welders, and bricklayers. All of these fields are actively seeking to recruit women and pay a living wage. If you invest in women, you invest in their children and their communities."



Youth Engaged in Philanthropy allows local high school students to experience philanthropy and community building through youth-oriented programs. The youth learn first-hand about giving back through volunteer opportunities and by coordinating a \$10,000 grant cycle (thanks to a donation from a generous anonymous donor).

With the mission of connecting people who care with causes that matter, IPFC offers philanthropic leadership,



organization, and grant-making for the long-term enrichment of our community. In 2020, IPCF and its fundholders awarded nearly \$2.9 million to nonprofits in our community, state, and country. Their vision is to create a healthy, vibrant, and sustainable community through engaged philanthropy. Helping donors reach their philanthropic goals keeps their team inspired. "Basically, we're getting paid to help people be nice to each other," says Greg.

The IPCF team feels privileged to work with two families by creating memorial funds for their sons they lost during military service. According to Michele, "The families of Anthony Maddox and Josh Rodgers have trusted the Community Foundation with their sons' memories and we take that responsibility very seriously. Both funds support charitable military organizations and provide scholarships to local students."

The range of IPCF's funding portfolio is vast. For example, they served as fiscal sponsor for the Harmony Park Project. "This helped give the project credibility while they were raising money to build McLean County's first inclusive park in Bloomington. IPCF handled the administrative aspect as far as tracking donations, providing tax receipts, and sending thank you notes so that project leaders could focus on raising funds instead of paperwork. We were thrilled when the park officially opened in August 2019, allowing people of all ability levels to enjoy the same space and play together," recounts Michele.

Each November, IPCF hosts a workshop for local nonprofit organizations to connect and exchange information, as well as a celebration to honor their Philanthropists of the Year. The 2020 recipients were Arthur and Camille Taylor of Bloomington and Susan Hoblit of Atlanta.

To learn more about the Illinois Prairie Community Foundation, visit ilprairiecf.org.

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