



INSPIRATIONAL GIFT

BLUE GRASS COMMUNITY FOUNDATION MARKS 50 YEARS OF SUPPORTING
A RANGE OF CENTRAL KENTUCKY INITIATIVES

By Terri Darr McLean | Photos by Mark Mahan



BGCF president and CEO Lisa Adkins, left and above, says the organization wants charitable giving to be a “part of everyday life.”



The foundation facilitates initiatives that bring people and ideas together.

The Blue Grass Community Foundation — which last year provided \$80 million in philanthropic grants — started with a \$1,000 donation 50 years ago, proof that a little charity can go a long way toward helping others. With that single donation, C.W. and Irene Sulier helped launch Kentucky’s first community foundation and set in motion a half-century of philanthropic endeavors in Lexington and beyond.

“Neither one of them was a Lexington native ... but they really believed Lexington was fundamental to their success,” said Lisa Adkins, foundation president and CEO. “Lexington let them grow a successful business. Lexington was the place where they met and married, where they had a family. It was so important to them to have the opportunity to give back to the community.”

And give back they did, making donations to the foundation year after year — and inspiring others to do the same. Today, as Blue Grass Community Foundation celebrates its 50th anniversary, its charitable funds are worth more than \$122 million and

have provided about \$84 million in grant funding for civic and charitable projects.

Making giving an everyday part of life

When asked to offer a simple explanation of a community foundation, Adkins chuckled and said: “There is no such thing.”

At its core, a community foundation is a nonprofit organization that pools charitable donations, large and small, and invests them in a portfolio of diverse assets. Then, as the investments grow, the foundation puts a percentage of the funds back into the community to make it a better place to live.

But, as Adkins is quick to point out, foundations such as the one she has guided since 2009 often do so much more.

“Many community foundations have two halves or two sides,” she said. “One is very much about philanthropy and charitable giving — facilitating it, making it simple, making it cost-effective, making it accessible to givers of all sizes. Then the other side ... is community leadership and engagement. We like to say if you



Quality of life and ways to improve it were among the issues discussed at On the Table, the 2017 community engagement initiative.

have a good idea to make the community better, the community foundation may be a great place to incubate that idea and bring it to fruition.”

On its philanthropic side, Blue Grass Community Foundation’s mission is to help individuals, businesses, and organizations establish charitable funds as a way to pursue a specific cause. Currently, it holds 579 such funds, ranging in value from a few thousand dollars to tens of millions. Included is the Fund for Greater Lexington, a permanently endowed charitable fund designed to address the community’s needs and opportunities well into the future.

The foundation also assists with nonprofit development, offers planned giving support and philanthropic advising, and each year hosts with Smiley Pete Publications the GoodGiving Challenge, an online fundraising event for area nonprofits. In 2017 the GoodGiving Challenge raised \$1.4 million for 120 nonprofit organizations.

“Fundamentally, we want to promote charitable giving. We want it to be an everyday part of life,” Adkins said.

“It’s a catalyst for philanthropy in the community,” added John Hall, retired chairman and CEO of Ashland Oil, former board president of Blue Grass Community Foundation, and a former Keeneland board member.

On its leadership and engagement side, Adkins said, the foundation acts as a “community convener and facilitator.” Among its

programs and events is the On the Table community engagement initiative, which in 2017 brought together more than 11,000 Lexingtonians to discuss the community’s quality of life and what can be done to make it better. Because of its overwhelming success, a second On the Table event was set for March 28.

In addition, the foundation does a lot of “community focus work,” including awarding mini-grants to two Lexington neighborhoods: the east-end neighborhood of downtown Lexington and the North Limestone area. Those ongoing projects are being conducted in conjunction with the national Kresge Foundation.

Rural and Appalachian initiatives, such as helping nine counties set up their own community-based charitable funds, are also a priority for Blue Grass Community Foundation. It offers the GoodGiving.net — a public information platform with up-to-date information about 400-plus nonprofits across Kentucky. And, with seed money from Hall and his wife, Donna, it started a giving circle for emerging philanthropists. (See sidebar.)

‘No gift is too small; no dream is too big’

Through all its endeavors Blue Grass Community Foundation promotes accessibility to donors of all sizes. Yes, they work with numerous high net-worth donors who have established significant charitable funds.

“But we also very intentionally do things for small donors, young





Adkins stresses that the foundation reaches out to donors of all financial levels.

donors, diverse donors, and new donors,” Adkins said.

“No gift is too small; no dream is too big,” she added.

Likewise, the foundation will lend its expertise to any charitable dream or aspiration, no matter the size or scope.

“That is one of the huge benefits and strengths of a community foundation. We often say if it’s charitable and legal, we can do it. We try to be creative and innovative, and we try to find a way to say yes if it’s about giving and if it’s about improving our quality of life,” she said.

Proof that size doesn’t matter is the GoodGiving Challenge. Last year, more than 4,300 unique donors donated gifts as small as \$10 for a total of \$1.4 million.

“The philosophy is that if we can make giving simple, cost-effective, rewarding, and accessible, then people will do more of it,” she said.

A helping hand

When the nonprofit Friends of Kentucky Theatre was established in 2012, its goal was to raise funds to preserve, renovate, and enhance the historic downtown Lexington theater. Instead of handling the funds themselves, however, the group turned to the Blue Grass Community Foundation.

“By the time we incorporated ... we had come to the conclusion that it made sense to work through the community foundation,” said Bill Fortune, a University of Kentucky law professor, who at the time was the Friends’ treasurer. “All the money went through the community foundation. We didn’t even have a bank account.”

Blue Grass Community Foundation did not actually raise the money for the Kentucky Theatre project, but it did set up a charitable fund through which all donations were funneled.

“I think it gave a level of confidence to donors to know that the community foundation is handling the money rather than some group that just gets together and says, ‘Hey, we’re going to raise money for X, Y, and Z,’” Fortune said. “It’s a tremendous service.”

GIVING- 365 DAYS A YEAR

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hile Blue Grass Community Foundation is celebrating its past 50 years, it’s also looking toward the next 50 years — and beyond; specifically, toward engaging and inspiring the

next generation of civic and charitable leaders.

As part of the 50th anniversary observance, the foundation created a giving circle of young and emerging philanthropists who each commit to contributing \$1 a day for one year. Called BGCF365, the group’s contributions are pooled and split into two funds: one an immediate grant-making fund and the other a permanent endowment.

Once a year, group members choose the local charitable causes and projects they want to support in four categories: education, green spaces and public places, healthy neighborhoods, and transformative philanthropy. They’ve already awarded \$25,000 in grants.

“The idea behind this is for it to be fun,” said Lisa Adkins, president and CEO of Blue Grass Community Foundation. “There’s only one required meeting a year. If you want to help vote where the money goes, you come to the annual meeting.”

During that meeting, grant finalists make pitches for their projects or causes, then members vote via their cell phones. The recipients are announced shortly after.

“We thought this was an excellent idea to help the community and ‘grow’ philanthropy,” said former foundation board president John Hall, who along with his wife, Donna, contributed \$365,000 in seed money to create the endowment.

Anyone can become part of the group as long as they make the commitment to give at least \$1 a day for a year.

“This is our effort to sort of engage, inspire, and to help nurture that next generation of philanthropists and civic leaders,” Adkins said.



Above, Adkins meets with staff members Ryan Case, left, and Scott Fitzpatrick at the foundation's offices on East High Street, left. Top left, a participant in On the Table puts thoughts to paper at the inaugural event.

Similarly, Blue Grass Community Foundation holds a charitable fund and a permanent endowment for the much-ballyhooed Town Branch Park project in downtown Lexington. Even though the project has its own staff and board of advisers, “we are really helping facilitate that, much like we did for Friends of Kentucky Theatre,” Adkins said.

Identifying needs

Liz Knapp was one of the more than 11,000 Lexingtonians to attend the inaugural On the Table discussion sponsored by Blue Grass Community Foundation this past fall. She was also one of 27 individuals and groups that floated an idea to improve the community and received a mini-grant to bring it to fruition.

Called a What’s Next grant, Knapp’s \$2,000 award went toward a cash incentive game designed to increase the number of people who recycle in her Bradford Colony neighborhood.

“Two things had been immensely bothering me,” Knapp said. “One was the litter, and then the other issue was just knowing that people aren’t recycling.”

She even conducted her own neighborhood survey and discovered that of the 85 homes there, only 50 had recycling bins. Of

those, only 13 were being set out for regular pickup. “So basically only 15 percent of the people in my little neighborhood are actually recycling. We’re just not doing a good job here.”

Determined to do something about it, Knapp shared her thoughts at two separate On the Table discussions. Afterward, she applied for a share of the \$50,000 set aside for What’s Next grants — and was approved.

“I cannot say enough about how wonderful the Blue Grass Community Foundation process was. First of all, it was brilliant to do this On the Table discussion. But they didn’t stop there. They actually put it into action,” Knapp said.

Other What’s Next grants went to projects such as providing homework help for students in the Cardinal Valley neighborhood, a program to help stop bullying among middle school students, a tree planting initiative, and a community awareness project in the Joyland neighborhood.

“The collaboration and ideas make our community a better place to live, work, and play,” said Laurie Preston, director of community engagement for Blue Grass Community Foundation.

A better community was the goal the Suliers envisioned some five decades ago. **KM**