

## What's Your Ambition?!

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*If you are planning for one year, grow rice. If you are planning for 20 years grow trees. If you are planning for centuries, grow men.*

– Chinese Proverb

The Greater Clark Foundation (GCF) is located in Clark County, Kentucky, a community of roughly 35,000 that occupies the dividing line between Appalachian eastern Kentucky and bucolic equestrian farms of the central Commonwealth. Funding to seed GCF came from the recent sale of the local, 75-bed nonprofit hospital that served Clark and contiguous, rural communities. The hospital sale happened at the same time as the passage of the Affordable Care Act, and with it, Kentucky's decisions to expand Medicaid and run a state-based insurance exchange.

A group of eager new foundation board members recognized this seed funding and its timing as opportunities to make innovative investments that would advance the health and well-being of the community. The board and I knew that we wanted to try to work “upstream” from the health care system to affect the strongest predictors of health (education and poverty) and their related predictors (parenting and civic engagement). We agreed that we were willing to look at long-term strategies rather than quick fixes, but we were unsure about exactly where and why to invest our resources.

To tackle those questions, the board secured the services of an excellent organizational development consulting team that led us on a journey of discovery. We reviewed data about the community—past and present. In addition to the usual data points about health, the economy, education, political engagement, and civic engagement, we looked back at the history of our community and our state to identify significant civic milestones that shaped our community and influenced current day decisionmaking patterns and sources of power. Reviewing the data was interesting. We laid bare surprising insights by examining 200 years of history—a powerful reminder that past decisions lead to today's realities.

We learned, for example, that our community has not prioritized higher education for quite some time. Like many rural communities, the Clark region began as a predominantly agrarian economy and then opened to industry in the 1950s. By the 1970s, we assumed there

would always be well-paying industrial jobs that required only a high-school education. By the 1980s, it became clear that a local economy based on low-skilled industrial jobs was far more fragile than we anticipated. At the same time, our community's resilience was threatened by the loss of two four-year colleges that abandoned our city over the course of thirty years.

In reviewing our history, we also saw a pattern of community decisionmaking that was passive at best, and focused on the interests of a few at its worst, with no strategic eye toward the future. Looking at the historical timeline, one foundation board member remarked, “When things happened in our community, whether they were good or bad, it appears as if they happened to us, rather than because of us.”

Our journey of discovery also revealed volumes about our community's civic engagement and social capital. Through one-on-one interviews and focus groups, we learned that many citizens felt disconnected from the community's leadership, and worse, did not trust their leaders to act in the community's best interests. We heard repeatedly from people who believed their voice did not matter. Perhaps most significantly, a large number of people said they had given up on trying to make a difference—that nothing would ever change—and that Clark County would not live up to its potential.

These rich discussions over several months led to a call to action that was incredibly clear, incredibly messy, and not at all linear. The lessons we learned galvanized our board to make investments that will support the unrelenting pursuit of excellence in all assets that define a strong sense of place—civic engagement, economic development, education, health, well-being and quality of life. GCF will play the important role of catalyst, crusader, and promoter to ensure that Clark County is a vital and resilient community. Our work to-date has produced these guiding principles:

The foundation will provide aspirational leadership to the community by:

- Inspiring a vision for our future. The foundation will stimulate a community identity that is forward-leaning, self-sustaining, engaged, and resilient.
- Creating the conditions for long-term change. By working “upstream” on the root causes of social problems, the

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foundation will guide the community toward long-term community problem-solving. It will also seek to enhance four conditions that are required for change: capacity, collaboration, communication, and cohesion.

The foundation invests its resources where it can have a fundamental impact:

- civic and economic vitality;
- educational attainment; and
- health, well-being, and quality of life.

These three areas are deeply interrelated. Progress in one will contribute to progress in the others. Within those areas of focus, we do not limit ourselves to a traditional foundation role.

Although we are in the infancy of our strategic implementation, there is much to glean from our work thus far. We have learned much and we know where we are going.

GCF's tagline is *Ambition for a Vibrant Community*. To introduce The Greater Clark Foundation to the community and begin to pique the community's interest in looking toward the future, we launched a campaign called "*What's Your Ambition?!*" The early stages of this campaign are designed to encourage people to think about their ambitions for themselves, their families, and their community. If we do not have ambitions for ourselves and our families, how do we expect to craft ambitions for our community-at-large? The campaign is communicated primarily through a comprehensive multi-tiered communication approach and paired with a rapid-response mini-grants program designed to help our neighbors feel a sense of urgency and agency to create positive change.

We are in the early stages of a project that will repurpose 30 acres of land, formerly the site of the old hospital building. The parcel will be transformed into an iconic public greenspace designed through a process utilizing significant public input. Members of the community are weighing in on every aspect of the project, from physical amenities and audience benefits to governance and sustainability. The project, which is momentarily being referred to as *Project 1107* (a moniker derived from the address of the site), is viewed widely as one of the first intentional and strategic projects the community has embarked upon in quite some time. Project 1107 is intended to support the community's goals for economic development, health, and quality of life, as well as demonstrate to our community that we can create the future we envision for ourselves. The foundation has launched a companion project in our

downtown's main street corridor, where we are rehabilitating a historic warehouse that will serve as an anchor for downtown development, tourism, and community-building.

In the coming years, GCF will make significant investments in education. Although that strategy will be less obvious than our investments in the built environment, its impact will be just as compelling and relevant as our work on the two significant community development projects that are in progress.

GCF envisions a community with higher levels of health and well-being. But achieving the foundation's aspirations will require investing philanthropic resources in more than health-related behavior change. The context that drives community structure, especially related to opportunities in education and employment, must be shifted from ambivalence to action before real improvements in health outcomes can be reached. Before we can make any progress in community philanthropy, we must address our lagging self-image and raise expectations in our community. This community is blessed with an abundance of resources. We must believe only that a better future is possible. So, we continue to ask, *What's Your Ambition?!*