

40 YEARS OF GIVING

Celebrating our 40th Anniversary

BY: MIKE BAILEY



‘CONNECTING PEOPLE WHO CARE WITH CAUSES THAT MATTER’

If a mission statement could say it all in capturing the essence of an organization, it would be the one above belonging to the Community Foundation of Central Illinois (CFCI). The organization and those who run it have been living out that motto for 40 years.

While that 40th birthday celebration is a real milestone in the world of not-for-profit charitable organizations – 30 percent of them have a shelf life of less than 10 years, according to the National Association of Nonprofit Organizations & Executives (NANOE) – it’s the way the organization has grown and conducted itself, in concert with the driving force that is its eight-word motto, that makes it stand out as a force for good in central Illinois today.

It’s a testament to the leadership and staff of the organization, which has been able to tap into the uncommon generosity of a Peoria area long known for its big heart, if not always for its ability to cooperatively carry out its best intentions. That the Community Foundation has been able to clear those competitive hurdles and do so speaks to its perseverance, its collective and consistent competence, and its success in turning donors’ immediate dreams into forever realities. Had it been easy, it would not have been nearly as satisfying.

From the vantage of 2026 looking back at the organization’s humble founding on the eve of 1986, the Community Foundation we know today is one that has firmly established itself as a powerhouse convener, collaborator, crisis coordinator, collector/creator of charitable wealth, and contributor to a better central Illinois.

We may live in an age of hyperbole, but it is not exaggeration to say the Foundation’s giving has helped save lives, said Joe Rogers, chief operations officer of Adult and Teen

Challenge Peoria/Pekin, an organization that treats and ministers to those with alcohol and drug addictions, among other unhealthy dependencies. Over the last 25 years, CFCI’s grants to its housing, counseling, and other programs have been used to repair and restore the lives of those who come to them “as broken individuals,” said Rogers.

Mother Teresa said something to the effect that “You change one life, you change the world,” said Rogers. “They’re a great community partner. It takes a village.”

Twenty years ago, former Journal Star Opinion Page Editor Barb Drake wrote CFCI’s first history, and she put it this way.

“There are seemingly endless stories of concerts that wouldn’t have been held, organizations that wouldn’t exist, sculptures that wouldn’t have been bought, children who wouldn’t have been helped, cancer that wouldn’t have been detected, young people who wouldn’t have been educated, adults who wouldn’t have gotten jobs and resources that wouldn’t have been protected but for the Community Foundation of Central Illinois.”

Take that statement today regarding CFCI’s contributions to the health and quality of life of this part of central Illinois and multiply four score with an organization that has given away nearly \$155 million to more than 6,800 central Illinois causes since its inception. It has done so by growing its endowment to over \$90 million, more than quadruple what it had in the bank in 2008. It now administers a staggering 460 funds.

The numbers speak for themselves.

But here in CFCI’s History, Part II, let us delve into the stories behind those numbers, and the stories behind those stories.

1986-2006

THE FIRST 20, A SYNOPSIS

It is said that you can't know where you're going if you don't know where you've been.

The Community Foundation was incorporated on Dec. 27, 1985, after two years of study. At the time, the Peoria area was emerging from one of its worst economic periods ever, with 27,000 jobs lost in the first half of the decade between Caterpillar's downsizing and the closure of Hiram Walker and Pabst. A popular bumper sticker at the time read, "Will the last person leaving Peoria please turn out the lights?" Inflation had hit nearly 15 percent. Thirty-year mortgage rates peaked at 18 percent. Ronald Reagan was America's president, and he was meeting face to face with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

Better times were on the horizon.



John and Linda Sahn | 2016 Annual Meeting

John Sahn was a 30-something attorney and CILCORP vice president when he was pegged by executives Harry Feltenstein and Bob Viets to represent the utility at CFCI as the 1980s were coming to a close.

"My recollection is, I was wading in with some really big hitters," said Sahn. The likes of industrialist Lew Burger, banker David Connor,

attorney Bill Rutherford, Caterpillar executive Ed Siebert, etc., icons all of a relatively glorious era of Peoria's rich history, "had influence, authority, money," he said. Hanging out with them "was a pretty heady experience."

That original Community Foundation Board was comprised of Burger as its president, Siebert as vice president, and Connor, Rutherford, Lynn Landes, Mary Sharp, William Vogelsang, Warren Webber and James Wogsland.

"I became friends with all of them. I learned so much from them about not-for-profits, corporate governance."

Besides the extensive knowledge base, they shared a few other traits, as well, including a generous spirit, formidable will, good judgment in character, and a farsighted view of what CFCI could do for the community.

In addition, "they were all willing to take a risk," said Sahn. "They all have been proven right."

It speaks to an uncommon stability that there have been just four executive directors in the organization's 40-year history: Mark Roberts, 2008-present; Jim Sullivan, 1999-2008; George Kreiss, 1995-99; and Donna Haerr, 1988-95.

Each brought something unique to the table, but it was Haerr, a volunteer's volunteer and medical technology professional with a degree in biochemistry – she might have been a doctor in another era, who set the tone. She had no roadmap to guide her but owned energy, creativity and a sense of purpose to burn. Sahn remembers his work on the committee charged with hiring the Foundation's first executive director as "a fairly big responsibility." They interviewed three people, all top-notch. One stood out.

"No question Donna Haerr was the one for the job," he said. "Outstanding."

Nonetheless, the Foundation continued to face headwinds in terms of credibility and fundraising, even with those heavy hitters on board, as other charities and not-for-profit service organizations, protecting their own respective turfs, viewed it with suspicion.

By 1988, the Foundation had just \$2,540.39 on hand and nothing in its endowment. No grants were going out.

“One of the things we sought to do was be a convener,” recalled Sahn. “We didn’t have any money. The way we could make a difference was by convening community groups. These organizations don’t talk to one another. They’re competitive. They’re trying to survive.”

Still, it was rough rowing. Lesser men and women might have walked away in frustration. Fortunately, Haerr may have been flying solo at the office, but she had critical support outside its doors.

Not least of whom was Ed Siebert, who had a Fortune 100 company in his back pocket as head of the Caterpillar Foundation.

“In my mind, the Community Foundation was Ed Siebert’s brainchild,” said Karl Kuppler, a retired tax attorney who served as CFCI Board chairman from 2007-09. Siebert got Cat to pony up not only the seed money but the hand-me-down furniture for the Foundation’s office.

“The Foundation never would have taken off without that support,” said Kuppler.

CFCI grew steadily but not remarkably. By 1995, not quite 10 years in, Haerr was ready for retirement. The endowment stood at just \$1.6 million and \$738,127 had been distributed to community endeavors. The endowment target officially had been \$5 million, but Haerr later



Donna Haerr | 1988 Jefferson Bank Building Office

confided that, in the back of her mind, \$10 million by that point had always been the goal. The more money you raise, the more you can invest, the more you can give away. That’s the Foundation’s business model. There was great frustration at the inability to gain more traction.

The Foundation had promises but not cold, hard cash, and its leaders were always waiting for those “big situations to mature,” said Kuppler. “The whole thing was, you had to get to some number. Nirvana was far less than \$80 million. We were happy to get to \$20 million. \$20 million would make us self-sufficient and develop additional seeds for the future.”

“We hoped we would get there and not have to be out there, hat in hand.”

Not to worry (though there was certainly some of that at the time). Siebert and others were playing the long game.

“ IN MY MIND, THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION WAS ED SIEBERT’S BRAINCHILD.”

– KARL KUPPLER, 2007-09 CFCI BOARD CHAIRMAN

What would Siebert say?

John Disharoon worked in marketing at Caterpillar, starting his career there in 1988 under the tutelage and support of Siebert, Henry Holling, Tim Elder and others.

"Ed and I just clicked," he said.

At that time, Cat was a major benefactor to the United Way while also playing a hand in launching the Community Foundation, which was "struggling to get off the ground," said Disharoon. As such, Caterpillar employers were being encouraged to donate some of their Caterpillar stock to the fledgling organization, he recalled.

Disharoon was rising up the corporate ranks. Busy with his career and raising a young family, he was on his way to job assignments for Cat in Washington, D.C., Europe, and eventually Milwaukee. He remembers Siebert taking him aside before his departure and saying, "You know, John, this (the Community Foundation) means a lot to Cat. It means a lot to me. We're going to need somebody in 25 years. When you come back, I want a commitment from you that you're going to get involved."



Ed Siebert and Anne Fox | 2012 Annual Meeting

That invite/nudge stuck with Disharoon, who was back in Peoria by 2012 and on the Community Foundation Board by 2013, "all out of a promise to Ed Siebert."

Siebert has been whispering in Disharoon's ear, literally and figuratively, ever since. His mentor died in 2015.

Throughout his life and career, every time he faced a difficult decision, Disharoon would ask himself, "What would Siebert say?"



THEN & NOW

VITAL STATS, VITAL PLAYERS

Today, CFCI's headquarters is at 3625 N. Sheridan Road in Peoria, with pretty much unanimous agreement that it is a vast improvement over its previous two addresses downtown, first at the old Jefferson Bank Building (now OSF headquarters), then at Civic Center Plaza.

The organization serves all or part of 14 counties within a 50-mile radius of Peoria.

If once upon a time, CFCI was pretty much a one-person operation, as of 2026 it is staffed by six people.

Those six people are as follows:

- **Mark Roberts**, President and CEO
- **Sarah Fletcher**, Vice President of Philanthropy
- **Cara Allen**, Vice President of Communications
- **Amanda Fiske**, Director of Grants and Community Initiatives
- **Jeanette Wilson**, Office Manager
- **Michelle Cecil**, Financial Manager



Julie Schifeling, a paralegal at RLI Insurance, adjunct professor teaching Social Justice Advocacy at Bradley University, and longtime community activist, is serving a second stint on the Board and has nothing but high praise for those who make it go on a daily basis.

Ask her about the Community Foundation's secret sauce, and she doesn't hesitate: "It's heart. It's the heart of the leadership. It's the heart of the staff."

They have been backed by strong, outspoken, working boards.

"It's not a rubberstamp board," noted Don Shafer, its chairman from 2019-21 who's now doing a second Board turn, as well. "You don't go on the Board unless you have a passion for the mission."

Disharoon, who was Board chairman from 2017-19, noted that the "working" part of that equation has long been a priority.

"If you can't make two meetings in a row, you'd get a call from me," he said. "If three, I'd ask you to vacate that seat."



Mark Roberts and Don Shafer | 2018 Thanksgiving Luncheon Tom Connor Service Award

Fortunately, there has not been much in the way of musical chairs at CFCI. What there has been is extraordinary role modeling over the last four decades from a Who's Who of prominent Peoria area citizens who have striven to improve the place they call home through their chairmanship of the CFCI Board, starting in 1988 with Lew Burger, the formidable former executive of LeTourneau-Westinghouse and American Standard before becoming the godfather and guiding spirit behind the Peoria Civic Center.

Indeed, today's leadership stands on the shoulders of those who came before. While 128 people have served on the CFCI Board over the last 40 years, only 21 have had the distinction of occupying those top seats. They are, in alphabetical order:

- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| • Bashir Ali | • Donna Marcacci |
| • Lew Burger | • Michel McCord |
| • Ross Canterbury | • Lea Anne Miller |
| • John Disharoon | • Valerie Moehle |
| • Jim Fassino | • Arthur Oakford |
| • Gerald Flaherty | • John Sahn |
| • Don Forrest | • Chris Setti |
| • Christopher Glynn | • Donald Shafer |
| • Karl Kuppler | • Vicky Stewart |
| • Duane Livingston | • Jay Vonachen |
| • Terry J. Machetti | |

“YOU DON'T GO ON THE BOARD UNLESS YOU HAVE A PASSION FOR THE MISSION.”

– DON SHAFER,
2019-21 CFCI BOARD CHAIRMAN

Today, the baton has been handed to 19 other volunteers “who care” about “causes that matter,” as well. As of mid-2026, they are:

- Lea Anne Miller, Chairwoman (State Farm)
- Will Ball, Vice Chairman (Caterpillar, Inc., retired)
- Andrew Ryon, Treasurer (Gordon, Stockman & Waugh PC)
- Julie Schifeling, Secretary (RLI)
- Dr. Songo Dede (DSM-H LLC)
- Dr. Sharon Desmoulin-Kherat (Peoria Public Schools, retired)
- Mary Etrick (Attorney, self-employed, retired)
- Laura Gleissner (PNC Bank)
- Frannie Heine (Maui Jim Sunglasses)
- Angela Allen Henry (The Traveler Weekly)
- Kip McCoy (OSF Healthcare)
- Shauna Musselman (Peoria County)
- Tina Ramirez (Caterpillar, Inc.)
- Michelle Sanders (Illinois Primary Health Care Association)
- Don Shafer (Illinois Central College, retired)
- Nora Sullivan (Methodist College and American Red Cross, retired)
- Tammy Waterworth (PNC Bank)
- Arthur Welch (Peoria Citizens Committee for Economic Opportunity, retired)
- Emily Wilburn (Illinois Mutual Life)



“Nobody’s on there to pad a résumé. It’s because people authentically and genuinely care and they’re capable enough to make a difference,” said Board Vice Chairman and former Caterpillar Foundation Vice President Will Ball, who will soon assume the top spot. When he served on the Board nominating committee, “everybody we asked said yes within the first minute of the ask. They’re busy people. 100 percent of the people who were asked last year said yes. I honestly feel privileged to be a part of this.”

In all, 140 central Illinoisans have served on the Community Foundation Board over the last 40 years. The others include:

- Dr. Meenakshy Aiyer
- Mary Ardapple
- Eldon Arnold
- Nathan Bach
- David Bailey
- Kevin Barbier
- Patricia Barton
- Dr. Romaine Bayless
- Ryan Beasley
- David Bielfeldt
- Debra Bowers
- Alma Brown
- Laraine Bryson
- Sandy Burke
- Ray Busam
- Cathy Butler
- Erik Christian
- Scott Cisel
- Jane Converse
- Sarah Cordis
- Royal Coulter
- Michael Cullinan
- Dan Daly
- Courtney Dean
- Mary Dill
- Ellen Dingledine
- Tammy Duvendack
- Shelley Epstein
- Dennis Ewald
- Cindy Fischer
- Ellen Foster
- Anne Fox
- Christell Frausto
- Taylor French
- Charles Gagnier
- Beth Gehrt
- Ron Givens
- Elaine Gordon
- Steve Gosselin
- Lowell (Bud) Grieves
- Matt Gross
- Seshadri Guha
- Joshua Gunn
- Dawn Harris Jeffries
- Chip Hemmer
- Ed Hoerr
- Jerold Horn
- Dianna Hunter
- Neal Johnson
- Rick Klinedinst
- Pablo Koziner
- Rita Kress
- Rich Kriegsmann
- Michael Landwirth
- Deborah Anne Lane
- Jeff Lange
- Ray Lees
- Rex Linder
- James Mamer
- Mike Marvel
- Leslie McKnight
- Ron Miller
- Becky Mills
- Jim Montelongo
- Steve Montez
- Theresa Murphy
- Andrea Parker
- Harriet Parkhurst
- Stacy Peterson
- Mike Quine
- A.J. Rassi
- James Rinkenberger
- Debbie Ritschel
- William Shay
- Dr. Joseph Solovy
- Mark Spenny
- Thomas Spurgeon
- Robert Stevenson, III
- Karen Stumpe
- Harriet Swager
- Marsha Swardenski
- William Tunis
- Robert Viets
- Jay Walton
- David B. Wiest
- Jennifer Wilfong
- Peter Wong
- Maxine Wortham
- Jan Wright
- Dr. Thomas Wyman
- David Wynn
- Murray Yeomans
- Keith Yoder
- James Yordy
- Ken Zika





Carole and Owen Ackerman | 2026 Annual Meeting

'A little different animal.'

Pose the question about what distinguishes the Community Foundation from other charitable organizations, and what draws such talent and participation to it, and you get a variety of answers, if with a central theme: If you want your money and your ability to do good through charitable giving to outlive you, the Community Foundation is the way to go.

"What makes the Community Foundation valuable to central Illinois is the opportunity for people to direct funds to where they want and to do it in a meaningful, efficient way. The least effective way to support something is to write them a check. You get a tax deduction," said Owen Ackerman, a retired financial planner and insurance adviser who with his wife Carole has been a longtime CFCI fundholder.

Let's say you donated stock for which you paid \$25 or \$50 a share, and after it's been under CFCI management for a while, "now it's worth several hundred dollars a share," Ackerman explained further. "You can be so much more effective in giving, and it doesn't hurt you at all.

"There's no other organization in town that has the same role."

"It's a long-term approach to charitable giving," confirmed Don Forrest, who is senior director of business development at Farnsworth Group and

served as Board chairman from 2021-23. As such, it's a patient person's game. Estate planning can take decades to bear fruit. Meantime, CFCI is not out there "having fundraising golf outings" to fill in the gaps.

"You're cultivating a whole different tier of donors," said Forrest. "It's a little different animal."

"If you think of the United Way as the community's charity checking account, the Community Foundation is the community's charity savings account," said Chris Setti, former president of the Community Foundation Board and CEO of the Greater Peoria Economic Development Council.

Because of that focus on investing before distributing, as well as CFCI's large footprint – as evidenced by the 460 funds it manages – "it really will be here forever," said Valerie Moehle, a Pekin-based attorney and former Board chairwoman (2009-10). "We can't say that will be true of the myriads of other not-for-profits here."

For long-time giver Barbara, who set up a fund with her husband Homer more than 30 years ago, it's pretty darn simple.



Homer Gurtler, Barb Gurtler, and Art Oakford
2019 Annual Meeting

"I just do what I do and let them go with it," said Gurtler. "They're pretty open about everything. They have their annual meeting, and they tell it how it is. I've gotten to know Sarah and Michelle and Mark and they're good people."

Fundamentally, "it's a place to invest your money so it can grow. Most charities, it's 'we need money, we need money.' There's no investment other than helping them with their cause," she said.

"Part of it is being lazy," she said with a laugh.
"They do it. I don't have to."

Indeed, that "one-stop shopping" aspect of CFCI also has broad appeal to others, including well-known philanthropists Sharon and John Amdall, who have been as involved with and as giving to the Community Foundation as anybody, starting 27 years ago when they first opened a Depository account. Their experience has been so positive that it came with ensuing support through CFCI for the Women's Fund, The Arts Mean Business Fund, The Local Jobs Fund, and Wheels O' Time Museum. They also are Legacy Society members who have set aside a portion of their estate for the Foundation when the time comes.

The Amdalls have entrusted the Community Foundation with the responsibility to reliably and responsibly invest their charitable dollars including appreciated stock, to provide timely, accurate documentation of such, to offer direction when requested, and to help lead the way on community collaboration for important causes, such as food insecurity.

Another differentiator? One of the benefits of the Community Foundation, said Setti, is its adaptability "as a vehicle to do the things that need to be done." Examples were the quick pivots in response to the 2013 tornado that hit central Illinois, and then, later, to COVID.

Retired banker and former CFCI Board Chairwoman Donna Marcacci agreed, noting that if someone has built up a bit of a nest egg and is looking for a place to plant it, grow it, and share it, that person need look no further than CFCI. "I think that the flexibility that CFCI offers in achieving one's charitable goals is unique," she said. "If an individual is unsure of how best to help the community financially, CFCI's grant-making process can help ensure that funds are going to worthy causes. If the individual has specific interests that he/she desires to fund, that can be achieved, as well."

Meanwhile, if "a lot of hands make for little work," said Disharoon, then that's what the Community Foundation does: It recruits those hands, gets



them in the same room, and persuades them, to borrow from Aristotle, that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Fundamentally, it's a connector, not a competitor.

"When most people give money, they write a check and they're done," said Jim Fassino, a retired banker and former Board chairman (2010-11). "The Foundation follows up to make sure it's spent wisely. I think that's important. It's good to give money to another organization that gets better results."

To be sure, the Community Foundation could follow investor Warren Buffett's "give it now" approach to philanthropy, and no doubt there are elements of the community that might say they could use the Foundation's \$92 million nest egg this very moment, "but then it would be gone," said Fassino. Parents could give their young adult children and grandchildren an inheritance right now, too, but that's not always wise. It's also not how you give away \$155 million over the last 40 years, more than the Foundation currently has in endowment.

"It gets the most bang for the buck, however it's spent and wherever it's spent," Fassino said. "It's a great organization, in my mind."

Setti gets the last word here.

"My whole career, all I ever wanted was to be useful to other people," he said. "I may not be the best actor, but I can be the best supporting actor. That's how I think of the Community Foundation."

2006 - PRESENT

THE SECOND 20

Mark Roberts comes to CFCI.

Every successful organization has certain hinges in its history, those moments when it becomes clear that the “after” means there’s simply no going back to the “before.” For CFCI, that year was 2008.

The endowment had grown substantially over the previous 10 years, topping \$22 million by 2006, but there were organizational challenges and storm clouds brewing. “Things began to unravel a bit,” recalled Sahn. Meanwhile, no local entity is immune to the forces of the wider world.

Enter Mark Roberts, 41 at the time, in May of 2008. A native of Mt. Zion, near Decatur, Roberts had previously worked at AT&T, Lutheran Hillside Village, Bradley University and the University of Illinois College of Medicine, largely in fundraising, development and community relations roles. He didn’t have much not-for-profit experience.

“We took a big chance on Mark when we hired him,” said Valerie Moehle, who started “on the same day” with Roberts at CFCI and helped oversee the leadership transition. “He was qualified, don’t get me wrong, but he was stepping into something he had not done before.”

As president and CEO, Roberts would be tested right away.

By October 2008, the full impact of the global Great Recession, centered in the United States, had become abundantly clear. The stock market crash ushered in the worst economic collapse since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The Dow Jones Industrial Average had its worst week ever, losing more than 18 percent of its value on its way to shrinking by more than half. The



investment banking giant Lehman Brothers went bankrupt. Governments across the globe scrambled to stem the bleeding with emergency bailouts. On Main Street, nearly 9 million jobs disappeared as unemployment soared to 10 percent. More than one in seven Americans fell into the ranks of the poor. Some estimates had a quarter of Americans shedding 75 percent of their net worth.

Not in many of our lifetimes were the needs of so many so great.

At the Community Foundation, the \$24 million in assets Roberts had inherited just months before — \$20 million in the endowment and \$4 million in The Depository program — dropped 23 percent in short order, to about \$19 million, which prompted an immediate investment review.



“We were there in front of all of our people on a really dark day. The investment people showed up and exhibited calm, knowledge and trustworthiness,” recalled Moehle. “I think it was huge. We did that for several years. It was a smart thing for the Community Foundation.”

And it was quite the “welcome aboard” for Roberts.

“That was really hard,” he recalled. “We took pay cuts. We only had five people, but instead of getting rid of people, we did what we had to do. We limited the damage ... and stuck to the plan.”

Meanwhile, the organization hadn’t done any strategic planning in a decade and so work began on that.

“Some of this stuff isn’t sexy,” said Roberts, but improving the nuts and bolts of everyday operations was critical to “increasing organizational capacity to do some more good work.”

That planning also included building a board that would bring in some of the expertise and counsel that the organization needed and that would help change the culture.

“This is a working board,” reiterated Roberts. “We get the right people. We put them in the right spot.”

Organizational change of the magnitude that was required – there was a time when CFCI struggled to do accurate quarterly reports for fundholders – sounds simpler than it is.

“It took six years for me to get it to where I wanted it to be. It took six years for me to say, ‘OK,’” said Roberts.

The climb back up the ladder had begun. More change was coming to right the ship.

Meanwhile, by all accounts, Roberts has been up to the task and then some. Indeed, fast forward 18 years, from the perspective of 2026 peering back at 2008, and hiring Roberts was “nothing short of a stroke of genius,” said former CFCI Board Chairman (2011-13) and Caterpillar executive Chris Glynn.

“Especially under Mark’s leadership, they have blossomed into quite the umbrella,” said Carol Merna, CEO of the Center for Prevention of Abuse, which has been a consistent recipient of CFCI grants. “He has great relationships besides the knowledge. That really makes the world go round.”

Building Trust

Besides launching a strategic planning initiative, Roberts immediately set out to bring CFCI in line with national standards.

Over the last 18 years, the Foundation repeatedly has been accredited by the National Standards for U.S. Community Foundations, which is affiliated with the Council on Foundations, a 75-year-old non-profit membership association that provides guidance to and shares best practices with more than 1,000 organizations across the globe. The group scores community foundations in the areas of operations, fundraising, governance, staffing, “everything from A to Z,” said Roberts. It is the highest standard attainable for philanthropic excellence.

Every four years, CFCI reapplies for that stamp of approval.

Getting that validation became a priority when Roberts walked in the door, as “when it comes to doing good for the community, it’s critical that people know we can be trusted,” he said.

That process began with tearing things down, if not quite to the studs, then pretty darn deeply, so that he could build from a relatively clean slate. Many of those interviewed for this history referred to Roberts’ willingness to shake things up.

“The path that Mark has taken us on now has awakened a lot of people,” said Schifeling. “A lot of us wanted proactive grant-making but we just didn’t know what it looked like or what it could be.”

If previously the organization was “giving grant money to all the same people for all the same things,” strategic planning “showed us what it could be and it didn’t have to remain the same,” she said.

“A number of people on the Distribution Committee a long time ago, they did not embrace any change. ‘That’s the way we’ve always done it,’” said Fassino. “When Mark came on, everything was easier to question.”

As 2008 rolled around, one barrier that continued to hamper the Foundation was the confusion over what it was all about. “It was a very difficult thing for the general population to wrap their minds around,” said Fassino. Few knew what it was, what it did, or had the impression that “it was a well-run machine that had served the community,” which wasn’t really fair, as it “did touch a lot of people,” he said.

Specifically, more reliable data was needed to show donors that they were getting a good return on their investment, said Fassino. CFCI also needed more community outreach, to get out there and toot its own horn, to define itself rather than be defined. Speaking engagements were not to be turned down. If there was an opportunity to go on WMBD Radio’s “Greg & Dan Show,” Roberts went on the “Greg & Dan Show.”

Meanwhile, the organization needed a good rebranding. A new logo and a new website were needed. Roberts tapped into the marketing skills of Shelli Dankoff, Becky Mills, and the CFCI Marketing Committee and they “just killed it,” he said. Central States Media designed a new website.

“WHEN IT COMES TO DOING GOOD FOR THE COMMUNITY, IT’S CRITICAL THAT PEOPLE KNOW WE CAN BE TRUSTED.”

– MARK ROBERTS, PRESIDENT & CEO



Mark Roberts and Scott Witzig | Community Foundation Week 2025 | Greg and Dan Show

Nonetheless, even after its tornado response helped plant the Community Foundation on the public's radar in 2013, it continued to rankle Disharoon that "we're still the best kept secret in town. I said, 'We've got to change that.'"

To some degree, consider it mission accomplished. Better awareness of its existence and work? Check. Trust? Check.

Indeed, in 2019, when local leaders went out looking for a better model to deliver mental health services in central Illinois, a call was made to the Community Foundation to see what its role could be.

The process that would end up in what is now Trillium Place, the comprehensive community and hospital-based behavioral health system serving central Illinois, was a complicated one involving disparate cultures, said Gary Anna, then the outgoing senior vice president of business affairs at Bradley University also serving as board chairman of the Human Service Center Foundation. When the decision was made to move \$16 million to the Community Foundation to be invested through two funds toward the improved delivery of mental health services in central Illinois, to this day CFCI's largest contribution, Anna was at peace with the decision.

No one makes a call at that monetary level without faith in the competence, motivations and integrity of those involved.

"There were no reservations about the people involved moving forward," said Anna. "These folks had a focus on community service and delivery enhancement, and that's why this works."

"They excel at creating an atmosphere of trust," said the Amdalls.

TURNING POINTS, MAJOR INITIATIVES

Location is everything.

By the mid-teens of the 21st century, it had become clear that the Community Foundation's address was getting in the way of it becoming all that it could be.

The organization started out in the old Jefferson Bank Building at 124 SW Adams in downtown Peoria, well after its heyday glory as Block & Kuhl and way before its resurrection as the OSF headquarters, first on the fifth floor and then in an odd space on a mezzanine level between the first and second floors, with one small window and no elevator access.

"It was not an easy place to find," recalled Kuppler, and the elderly and physically compromised had trouble traversing the stairs. The only redeeming qualities of the offices were that they were free.

That was followed by a move to Civic Center Plaza, 331 Fulton Plaza.

By the time Disharoon came on board, CFCI was "in a hell hole downtown" and needed "to find a better a place to park," he said. Once upon a time, it had been important to be downtown because that's where the action and the jobs were, and you could court clients and potential contributors at the Creve Coeur Club or another decent dining establishment, but Peoria's downtown had not aged for the better. The building headquartering CFCI had begun to show lack of maintenance. There was no storefront with visibility from the street. In short, the location had become a liability and a discouragement to donors.

Recognizing that, Disharoon, with assists from John Sahn and Caterpillar's Sid Banwart, went scouting for a new, physical home, but they already had a place in mind.



John Disharoon, Martha Herm, David Bailey, and Sid Banwart | 2019 Annual Meeting

Great Central Insurance at 3625 N. Sheridan Road in Peoria had closed up shop and First Federated Church had purchased the property. Disharoon's father had retired as a vice president at Great Central and "I knew every inch of that building," he said. Roberts still needed some convincing, Disharoon recalled.

What they found was a vacancy in the center of the city, adequate space for everyday office business and larger special events, available, short-walk parking, far improved accessibility with a ground-floor entrance, a welcoming neighborhood, a storefront facing the street, significantly higher visibility, and favorable terms from the owner.

"We walked out of the building and Mark said, 'That's it,'" recalled Sahn, whose contacts at First Federated had helped seal the deal.

They haven't regretted the move.



CFCI Open House and Ribbon Cutting | 2015

‘Goin’ to Kansas City. Kansas City, here we come.’

In 2013, with a small staff that had its hands full and then some, Roberts & Co. decided that their limited time and resources would be better spent on issues outside its backroom management responsibilities. CFCI contracted with the Greater Horizons program at the Kansas City Community Foundation to provide fundamental administrative and investment services.

Roberts was six years into his tenure and “we were still fixing things,” he said. “At that time, it was a very good choice for us ... to give us breathing room and to start to grow.”

And grow CFCI did. Over the next five years, recognition of the organization jumped, as did its endowment, as did its staff. The organization had matured and so had its capabilities.

In retrospect, Greater Horizons allowed the Community Foundation here to stabilize itself while focusing like a laser on growth, said Roberts. Since then, “it’s been like a rocket ship,” he said.

In 2019, Kansas City decided to get out of that business. Peoria was ready for it.

“I knew we needed to leave them, or they were going to leave us,” Roberts said.

Investment and operational responsibilities were returned to Peoria, the administrative infrastructure was rebuilt, and a new computer system was installed, all over the next year and a half. Since 2022, all operations have been in-house, and now the Foundation has branched out to offer its own version of those services to satellite community foundations in the region such as Morton, Washington, and Forman Valley (Manito, Forest City, Topeka, and Green Valley), essentially doing for others what Kansas City did for Peoria.

“I love that model and I think there should be more of it,” Roberts said.

'A wonderful experience out of an unwonderful circumstance.'

On the evening of Nov. 17, 2013, Roberts had taken his family to the Red Robin restaurant in East Peoria for a meal after losing power at his Morton home due to the violent storms earlier that day. Mother Nature had largely spared his neighborhood, but Pekin, East Peoria, and especially Washington hadn't been so lucky as the tornado gathered steam on its northeastward path, reaching EF-4 intensity with winds of 190 m.p.h.

The damage was devastating. Three people were killed and another 125 injured along its path. The property damage was extensive, \$800 million in Washington alone, where hundreds of homes had been hit in whole or in part.

"It occurred to me, 'Wait a minute, we have to do something. I don't know what we need to do, but we need to do something,'" Roberts recalled nearly 13 years later. "That was formative for us."

He went to work immediately, securing a \$500,000 grant from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, to be put toward the creation of the Tri-County Long-Term Recovery organization (LTR). More donations followed, with LTR distributing some \$1.6 million to tornado victims before it was all said and done.

Besides collecting the money, LTR took over the effort to organize the dollars coming in so they could be put to the best use. Generous donors,

touched by the tragedy, "were giving things that weren't needed," said Fassino, who chaired LTR, with Roberts serving as secretary. "Cash is what people needed, or a gift card, not used popcorn."

Former Washington Mayor Gary Manier remembers the same thing. He got a call from an architect in Chicago who wanted to wire \$100,000 and just needed a routing number. At the time, there was no mechanism to accept the money. LTR helped rectify that situation.

Again, people were uncommonly generous. Often the money came in coins and crumpled dollars, stuffed into envelopes from grade school classrooms across the region as even children recognized the need. Roberts remembers one such example, a total of \$21.60 from a kindergarten class at Irving School in Tinley Park, Ill. "We put all that money in a fund with hundreds of thousands of dollars, and by golly, it was put to good use."

While most of the victims had homeowner's insurance, it didn't cover everything, so LTR stepped into that breach. Many people had glass, nails and other things embedded in their lawns and landscaping. Manier remembers one homeowner coming across a fan blade buried in his front yard. For many, insurance didn't cover soil mitigation, which can run several thousands of dollars.



“Those kids couldn’t go into their lawn and play,” Roberts said. “That really bothered me.”

Meanwhile, LTR convened anchor organizations in the community and actually asked what the unmet needs were. If a family living in Washington’s Georgetown Apartments had witnessed the winds take away their van, help would be forthcoming to replace it. If someone needed a kitchen appliance, LRT and CFCI would be there.

Fassino remembers it as “probably the most rewarding experience ever to see all those entities coming together. When you read the news of all that’s wrong with the world, and you see that come about ...”

“Mark’s group did a great job,” said Manier. “It’s really hard to figure out if somebody’s being

honest or dishonest but for the most part people were honest, told people what they needed and that’s what they gave.”

“We were very blessed to have so many people come to our rescue and aid,” continued the mayor. “I don’t know how we recover without them, not only from a financial standpoint but from the emotional, prayerful contribution they gave.”

“It was a wonderful experience out of a really unwonderful circumstance,” said Roberts. “That was the silver lining. We all learned a lot.”

And while many people still credited the likes of the Salvation Army and local churches for the assistance, and deservedly so in many cases, the Community Foundation had entered the public psyche in an unprecedented way for the organization.

Global pandemic, local needs.

The Foundation had learned a lot in its response to the Washington tornado, so when COVID came along in 2019, its leaders were geared to go. As always, local givers stepped up, contributing nearly \$297,000 to the Central Illinois Disaster Recovery Fund, of which almost \$274,000 was dispersed for housing stability efforts for those in danger of becoming homeless, for physical and behavioral health care needs, for emergency food programs and childcare support, and for health and safety measures including basic cleaning and hygiene supplies.

Because of the Community Foundation’s Ending Hunger Together program, CFCI already had a deep relationship with HEAL Food System Partners, an initiative that consolidates existing food programs to increase access, which allowed for the rapid deployment of food baskets throughout the community, said Roberts.

Meanwhile, like so many employers across the nation, CFCI also had to scramble to figure out its own office work situation. Ultimately, it carried

over its remote work program post-COVID to allow that option on Fridays for office staff, a policy that continues to this day. “I think this has been a very important reinforcement of our commitment to work/life balance at CFCI,” said Roberts.

For Will Ball, it was a reminder of what he first saw in CFCI when he ran the Caterpillar Foundation.

First, it was the work Roberts & Co. was doing “connecting with donors. It felt very grass roots,” he said, acknowledging just how difficult it is to reach that level of authenticity in a large corporation.

Beyond that, “I like the nimbleness and the agility of the Community Foundation to identify and meet those needs very quickly.”

In other words, in times of crisis, you need a speedboat, not necessarily an aircraft carrier. CFCI can be both built for both the immediate crisis and the long voyage.



Emerging Philanthropists Grant Presentation to Graceland Center for Purposeful Aging | 2023

Emerging Philanthropists Fund

"When I came to the Foundation, I wanted to work with a younger demographic," said Roberts.

What if the Foundation were to develop a "giving circle," he thought, that would recruit young professionals, largely under 30 and just getting started in their careers, to give at least \$100 a year toward a permanent fund that would then grant money to a community need?

The idea was to "engage a bunch of up-and-coming folks who would eventually be the ones running things," Roberts said. "We wanted to plant the Community Foundation in their psyche."

Among the first was Doug Shannon, now a wealth management advisor who in 2012, at 30 years old, became the first chairman of the Emerging Philanthropists Fund. "My first board," he said.

The premise was "we were all young professionals doing well but not making great money," said Shannon. By giving from \$100 to \$300 annually, they could pool their resources and help build an endowment, modeled after the Women's Fund. Some \$5,000 annually goes to a worthy cause.

"Like anything in a town the size of Peoria, it's all about good people asking others to do good things," said Shannon, who recalls that first grant going to a local autism services center. "If you do well, you should help others."

The fund now has about \$84,000 and adds about 30 new contributors a year, for whom the organization also is a networking opportunity, he said. It has distributed more than \$64,000 since

its inception, most recently to Boys to Men Empowerment in 2025, a grant of \$5,000.

In "cutting their teeth at charity," those new contributors also build a new generation of givers as they're raising their own families, said Shannon, who described himself as "really passionate about it. It's a great way to teach my girls" – now 15 and 16 – "about giving back."

Beyond that, it's about building a core of future community for decades down the road.

He quotes leadership expert John C. Maxwell. "If you think you're leading and you turn around and nobody's behind you, you were just taking a walk," said Shannon, who is proud of his early involvement with Emerging Philanthropists and the example it established. "After you stop pushing the boulder up the hill, other people find it's a worthy enough cause to do the same. Other people are carrying the torch for us."

"It's all about trying to encourage people to be more intentional early in life."

The program has been so successful that it receives attention of more mature first-time givers.

Roberts mentioned a woman who had come up to him and said, "'I'm in my 70s but I consider myself an emerging philanthropist. Can I join this group?' And I said, 'Of course you can.'"

"The fact is we're building a roughly \$80,000 fund 100 bucks at a time," said Roberts. "That's a pretty neat trick, a testament to how community can work."

Impact Investing

In 2025, in a departure from past practice, the Foundation took an entrepreneurial turn with the creation of the Community Impact Investment Fund.

It is “a completely different way of doing business for the Community Foundation,” as it involves loaning money at a below-market interest rate with a required payback as opposed to granting it outright, said Setti, who chaired that inaugural committee.

It was a natural turn for Setti, who came at the idea through the prism of his work at the EDC.

“Where we struggle as a community is having early-stage capital for start-ups,” Setti said. The Foundation could step into this arena not only as a kind of economic development agency seeking a financial return – “We invest this money so we can spend this money,” said Setti – but as a not-for-profit seeking a social return, “a 2-for-1 kind of bargain.”

“If you want us to be like a bank, we’ll be a bank,” but more than that, the Foundation wants “a community impact investment,” said Setti, who helped oversee a 10-month process to build a local model that’s just begun emerging in the U.S.

“It’s not like, ‘Here’s \$10,000, I hope you do well with it,’” he said. “There’s a lot of vetting and due diligence. CFCI is not looking to assume a great deal of risk, though it may take a chance on a business that doesn’t have the best credit rating but does have a good business plan.” he said. In case of default, CFCI must be prepared to act. The loans must be made to a business in CFCI’s geographic area.

A first loan, three years at \$250,000 at 5 percent interest, with an option for another \$250,000, has been made to Justine Peterson, a St. Louis-area organization that acts as a re-lender for families at the margins who need a financing port of entry to access housing, for example, or start a business. The company brags a good track record and a low default rate. Affordable housing opportunities will be its focus in central Illinois.



The program has allowed the Foundation “to have a different conversation,” said Setti. “Can we leverage our money?”

It’s another example of getting away from “doing things because that’s the way you’ve always done it,” he said.

Ask other observers what they think of the program and they use terms like “game-changing” or “a paradigm shift in terms of innovation.” Roberts said it was one of the things the Foundation needed to do to differentiate itself.

“Investing literally is what it is. It’s not grant-making,” he said. “We’re moving a portion of our assets from Wall Street to Main Street.”

“We make an investment, it returns capital to us with a modest interest in return, but we make a social impact along the way,” he said. Basically, it’s a social “bridge loan.”

Roberts sees “zero downside” in launching this effort. “Number 1, we help create a living wage,” said Roberts, adding that it creates the potential for local jobs, as well. “If no one does this, it’s never going to happen.”

“We’re helping create businesses and fostering the workforce. This is a space we can play in that others can’t. This is the fun stuff.”

Follow the money.

Today CFCI manages about 460 funds feeding an endowment of approximately \$92 million, about \$7 million of which is unrestricted.

It does so with an annual operating budget that will clock in at right about \$1 million in Fiscal Year 2027, those revenues coming primarily through a modest administrative fee placed on the funds CFCI administers, along with some endowment. “We do very little fundraising,” said Roberts.

The Foundation’s top funds, by asset size, are:

- **\$14.62 million**
John F. Gilligan Community-Based Psychiatry Fund
- **\$4.77 million**
Community Crisis Center Fund
- **\$3.75 million**
Gilmore Fund
- **\$2.88 million**
Elmer & Adolph Pletsch Memorial Scholarship Fund
- **\$2.59 million**
Jean M. Brown Scholarship Fund
- **\$2.39 million**
Goodwill Industries of Central Illinois Fund
- **\$1.48 million**
Women’s Fund
- **\$1.27 million**
Yeomans Fund
- **\$1.19 million**
James & Rosella Bubert Charitable Fund
- **\$1.14 million**
Mary Eileen Carroll Charitable Fund
- **\$1.13 million**
Bernita A. Otto Charitable Fund
- **\$1.09 million**
Homer & Barbara Gurtler Designated Fund

“The market has been good to the Foundation,” said Sahn. Decades ago, CFCI brought on David Vaughan Investments (DVI) to consult on investments. “Their philosophy is perfect for the Community Foundation. The discipline has allowed this thing to go.”



Dr. Jack Gilligan | 2019 Annual Meeting

CFCI is a transparent organization, which readers can discover for themselves at its website, <https://communityfoundationci.org/>. Important documents and investment strategies specifically can be found at <https://communityfoundationci.org/access-financial-information/> and at <https://communityfoundationci.org/investment-results-fees/>.

In 2023, the decision was made to dissolve The Depository, which had started in 1991. Its primary appeal to donors was that it allowed them to take a tax deduction when they wanted it or needed it. It was especially important when capital gains were involved, as with appreciated stock.

“The Depository was a tremendous tool. In the early years, that was the only thing that kept the Foundation going,” recalled Kuppler. Caterpillar employees with their stock options were “the natural users of the Depository,” he said, and Siebert had sold his superiors at Caterpillar on promoting it.

Alas, The Depository was “a charitable checking account for people and the money was eventually going to leave, so you had to keep talking people into putting money into The Depository to keep it going,” Kuppler continued. People would grant \$100 at a time, and there was no end of paperwork, said Kuppler.

"It was a lot of hard work, way too much work for the money it generated, and it wasn't permanent money," he said.

Fundamentally, the Board decided that "a permanent endowment is the name of the game," said Roberts.

Before all was said and done, The Depository had granted more than \$79 million in its 32-year life.

If there should be any change in emphasis, said Roberts, it should be growing the unrestricted funds, which represent less than 8 percent of dollars on hand. That's important because it would give the organization greater latitude to respond in times of unanticipated community crisis.

Roberts taps into his memory of Jim Bubert, the former CEO of First National Bank in Peoria, which later became Commerce Bank. He died at the age of 92 in 2024, but prior to that he came to Roberts and said that he was interested in creating a fund of at least \$1 million, with no restrictions on its use.

"Most people have a designated idea of what they want to do," said Roberts. "To have a guy like Jim Bubert come along and say, 'The Community Foundation knows better than I know how to make these grants,' that helped a lot."

The James and Rosella Bubert Charitable Fund delivers \$50,000 plus annually to worthy causes determined by CFCL.



Karl and Cheryl Kuppler | 2015 Board Social



Jean M. Brown

'You don't need to be a millionaire to be a philanthropist.'

One perception that troubles Roberts is that the Community Foundation exists solely for those with the deepest pockets in the community.

He recalls giving a presentation at OLLI, Bradley University's lifelong learning center, where a woman said to him, "It sounds like the Foundation is only for wealthy people.' I was thunderstruck. It hit me between the eyes."

In fact, "you don't need to be a millionaire to be a philanthropist," he said. "Every dollar is important. Everyone can have a role."

He remembers the Catholic priest who left his entire estate to the Community Foundation. "He didn't have a lot, but he left it all," said Roberts, and it made a difference.

There have been others who might not have been considered rich in the traditional sense, but who lived frugal lives and squirreled away what they did earn. It can add up. Jean M. Brown gave her life to healing others and went on to become Caterpillar's first industrial nurse, working there for 43 years until her retirement in 1984. She never married. She had little family remaining. When she died in 2000, she had built quite an estate, willing \$1.47 million to the Foundation, to be put to good use for nursing scholarships.

Today, with healthy investment returns, the Jean M. Brown Scholarship Fund stands at nearly \$2.7 million. It is CFCL's fifth largest and has handed out almost \$1.8 million in nursing scholarships over the last quarter of a century.

THE SUPERPOWER OF MAKE-A-DIFFERENCE GIVING

'The work of Christ through a foundation.'



\$7.5 MILLION
2025 donation

\$155 MILLION
total donated

6,800+
total grantees

The Foundation has given away nearly \$155 million, including Depository funds, to more than 6,800 grantees over the last 40 years. In 2025, CFCI set a record with some \$7.5 million in grants.

In short, CFCI is a giving organization in a giving community. Indeed, between the Community Foundation and the Heart of Illinois United Way, which contributes another \$9 million plus annually to community programs, the Peoria area is top tier nationally in per-capita giving, said Roberts.

"So, the impact is large ... and we're going to get bigger and bigger," he said.

CFCI has created a 35-point grant rubric that it uses to help determine who the recipients will be. It is social services focused and tends to reward programs that are provably sustainable and collaborative in nature. Applicants must clearly identify the community need they're addressing, must describe the anticipated benefits and the population to be served, must provide a time frame for action, and must delineate the objectives along with the measurement tools to justify their achievement.

The Foundation gets about 125 applications a year, from which about half receive awards.

Don Forrest said that his time on the grants committee was both an educational and a rewarding experience, with sometimes stark differences in the applications, if not in the good intentions behind them. Get a grant request from the Center for Prevention of Abuse, for example, and there's little question about what they're trying to accomplish, how they intend to go about it, and their ability to pull it off, he said. Somebody else wants to put in a pen to shelter abandoned dogs, another worthwhile cause, "and the grant is handwritten," he said.

Both parties appreciate any help that the Foundation can give them. For the most part, "we're not giving away the \$500,000 grants," said Forrest. "But \$2,500 to \$3,000 to that dog kennel and all they want to do is build a fence, that's huge."

"Your \$10,000 in Elmwood, it impacts every single person in the community."

"Some float to the top," agreed Shafer. "A lot of discussion takes place. Some advocate. Why this one and not that one? We never come out with hard feelings."

"It's always, 'What can we do and how can we do more?'"

One of the things CFCI does that many other organizations don't is provide feedback to unsuccessful grant applicants, which is appreciated by Sharon and John Amdall, longtime contributors to CFCI. It can help them "improve their applications for the future, which may involve improving the nonprofit's operations as a result," they said.

The organization has two grant cycles every year, in spring and fall, along with two ceremonies recognizing the winners. Whether the checks are distributed individually at the recipient's workplace or collectively at a large event at CFCI, the reactions can be priceless, and sometimes emotional.



Mark Roberts | Bath, IL Splash Pad 2022

COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF Central Illinois across the new Bath splash pad during its inaugural session with second-graders of AC Central School. CEO Mark Roberts is cheered on as he takes a stroll

Bath splash pad helps kids beat the heat

Temperatures in the upper 80s and 90s made for the perfect weekend for the grand opening of a splash pad in Bath. The first group of children to kid-test the new feature, second-graders from AC Central School in Chandler, lined up around the pad until the water came squirting from the blue concrete. They jumped, squealed and laughed in the cool water. "That's what it's all about," said John Lorek of Illinois Ability Sports. The volunteer project was brought to fruition by Lorek and a number of volunteers, funded by groups, foundations and private individuals. Lorek said the splash pad was located in Bath in recognition of the lack of recreational opportunities for young children in southern

Mason and northern Menard counties. "I would have never thought of this except for those two kids in Beardstown drowned in the river," he said. Briston Dummire, 15, and his 12-year-old brother Jordan were swept away by the Illinois River and drowned in August of 2020. Still, Lorek, who is based in Havana, tried at first to bring the project to the Havana Park District, but they turned him down as they already had a pool, he said. That's when District 126 Supt. Matt Plater steered him toward Bath, telling him the kids in that community had nowhere to go but the river for recreational relief from the heat. Lorek said the project cost \$16,800 plus hundreds of unpaid hours of volunteer time to excavate the area, dig ditches, run pipes, install equipment, frame in the pad, install

control equipment, and make it squirt water on little kids. The money came from a number of groups, including the Community Foundation of Central Illinois, Darling Ingredients, Ameren, Betty and Kenny DeFord, and others. Those putting in the volunteer hours included Lorek, Jason Jones, Dave Meteler, Chris Rilea, Dan Griffin, and Lloyd Hamilton. Board members from the Community Foundation of Central Illinois, along with Bath village officials, visited the splash pad as the second-graders checked it out. As a good sport on a very hot day, Mark Roberts, the foundation's CEO, warned the kids he was "coming in," then strolled across the pad, getting drenched before he reached the other side, becoming the first adult to give the new water feature a try.

"Our tagline, 'Connecting people who care with causes that matter,' really says it all," said Disharoon, who characterizes his CFCI service as almost a religious or spiritual calling.

"It only takes one connection to change the direction of a city or a life. They make that connection 100 times a year," he said. "I'd go to a check presentation and see the tears of people whose lives have been changed... Not to get dopey on you, but I've seen it."

"You're doing kind of the work of Christ through a foundation."

“THE IMPACT IS LARGE... AND WE'RE GOING TO GET BIGGER AND BIGGER.”

— MARK ROBERTS, PRESIDENT & CEO

THE THANKFUL MANY

The Center for Prevention of Abuse

'A partner in bringing hope and healing.'

The Center for Prevention of Abuse (CFPA), the organization that serves as a protector and advocate for those who have been the victims of abusive relationships, may be the most awarded local not-for-profit by the Community Foundation. Indeed, its relationship with CFCI dates back to 1989-90, when it was called Tri-County WomenStrength, and was run by Martha Herm and was one of the original 12 grantees.

"It's been a really nice piece of our history," now at a quarter century and counting, said the Center's CEO, Carol Merna.

Over the years, CFCI has provided more than \$100,000 to the agency across multiple programs, including the Carol House of Hope shelter and the Children's Therapy Program for kids who have experienced "the worst kinds" of sexual, physical and emotional abuse, said Merna. Meanwhile, the organization's Children's Room at its main campus provides "a safe place to heal" and the "best kind of comfort," akin to a grade school classroom or Sunday school, she said. CFCI has helped replenish the shelter's food pantry, as well.

"We meet people at their hardest moment," now numbering about 6,000 annually, said Merna. CFCI has always been there for them.

"It's the kind of steady local investment that, it sounds cheesy, but it really changes lives," said Merna. "It builds a safer community in central Illinois.

"They are such a willing partner in responding to all crises ... It's what local generosity looks like. It's neighbor helping neighbor," Merna continued.



*Mary Etrick, Sara Runyon, Michelle Sanders, Nora Sullivan, Carol Merna, Amanda Fiske, and Christine Bare-Kemper
2025 Center for Prevention of Abuse Grant Check Distribution*

Meanwhile, CFCI also is a resource for advice and counsel.

"They are an open door for organizations like ours, high-impact human service organizations," Merna said. "When you can have a steady source of resources, that is tremendous. Not-for-profits are vulnerable to the uncertainties of government funding, the uncertainties of the times in general.

"When we have an immediate need, the Community Foundation is a very comfortable place to approach. We know they'll help us if they can.

"We're deeply grateful, not just for the funding but for the belief in our mission," said Merna. Were it not for CFCI, "we'd be scrambling to fill the gaps" in coverage for some of the most vulnerable families in the region. "It would definitely be painful.

"They are a partner in bringing hope and healing and safety to the people of our community. They strengthen our entire community."

Adult and Teen Challenge Greater Midwest

'A return...better than the stock market.'

The Adult and Teen Challenge Greater Midwest is “celebrating 25 years of miracles,” which may not have been achievable without the ongoing pat on the back of the Community Foundation, say the two men who run the show there, the Rev. Randy Atchley and Joe Rogers, its chief operations officer.

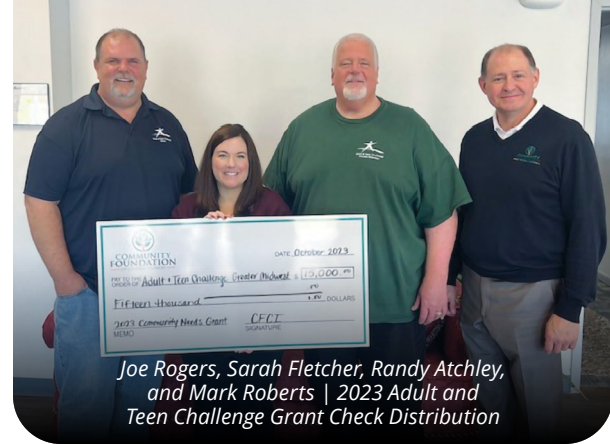
The organization provides a comprehensive, faith-based solution to life-altering behavior disorders and addictions that can include drugs, alcohol, pornography, and gambling. The agency runs a 12-month residential program for men age 17 and up, though the average age runs in the 30s, as well as counseling for males, females and families. Now Adult and Teen Challenge is hoping to expand its programs with the purchase of the former Guardian Angel Home in West Peoria, which would expand its capacity from 40 beds to 100 beds or better.

Over the last quarter century, Challenge has graduated 2,000 people who came to them “broken” and helped turn them into productive citizens with jobs, families, etc. In short, they have gone from a net minus to a net plus for society. “Do you know how many fathers have come to this program and become daddies?” asked Rogers.

To that end, the Community Foundation has given the agency “well north of \$100,000,” said Rogers, which has gone to everything from the purchase of computers to \$1,500 scholarships for the residential program.

“As they have supported us, the guys are changing their lives,” said Rogers. Many have been in rehab “five, six, seven, eight times,” he said. “It never worked. This is the one that works for them.”

Meanwhile, “they’re getting real-world job experience. They’re getting the work ethic. They’re able to go back into the community and



have a positive impact” while no longer being a drain on taxpayers and the welfare and criminal justice systems. Challenge assists with ongoing education and housing at no to minimal cost for its clients. The agency also provides a livelihood for 31 employees, all of them graduates of the program. “It’s a little easier to take it from a guy who’s walked in your shoes,” said Rogers. “You can’t fool the fool.”

All in all, “the return on investment for the community is better than the stock market,” said Atchley.

With an annual budget of \$2.7 million statewide, \$2.1 million here in the Peoria/Pekin area, Challenge has “50 percent sustainability” through its thrift store, construction company, moving company, etc. The rest is donor-based. They get “zero government help, zero insurance,” said Rogers.

And that’s where the Community Foundation comes in. Besides funding, CFCT provides two other things that are of very high value: awareness and acknowledgement, which motivates other donors.

“When the Community Foundation feels you’re worthy of a grant, you feel you are, as well,” said Atchley.

If the Community Foundation were no longer around, it would be “a huge loss” for all not-for-profits in the region. “Based on that \$100,000,” you’re looking at the potential loss “of 100 lives,” said Rogers.

“They’ve been there pretty consistently for us. Whether it’s \$1,000 or \$100,000, to be able to count on that when you’re coming up with a budget, it’s A1 critical.”

Big Picture Initiative/The Arts

'The fairy godmother to the arts organizations.'

When Eileen and Doug Leunig created their Big Picture arts initiative in 2018, they wanted to make a big splash, starting with their Abraham Blue mural on the east side of the Peoria County Courthouse and the interactive arts street festival. They applied for a CFCI Community Needs grant, with local arts philanthropists Sharon and John Amdall introducing them to Mark Roberts.

Ultimately, they got the seed money they needed, and since then it's been continued support and validation for their arts initiative. They received \$80,000 through CFCI over the last eight years, including two The Arts Mean Business grants.

For the arts in general in central Illinois, CFCI has "been a godsend," said Doug. "They allow a non-profit to dream."

Multiple funds provide money to the visual and performing arts in central Illinois – Arts Mean Business started by Sharon and John Amdall, the Annaliese Sinn Arts Fund, the Eugene and Harriet Swager Fund for Public Art, the Gilmore Fund, etc. – and there are many recipients, from Arts Partners to Camp Big Sky in Fulton County, from the Sun Foundation in Marshall County to the Central Illinois Youth Symphony, that can testify to the boost it has provided their programs.

"Without the Community Foundation, an organization like Big Picture would have had a lot of stumbling blocks," said Eileen. "Thanks to their early support, we've been able to not only survive but thrive."

Pragmatically, the grant process at CFCI is "less intimidating" and "more accessible" than a lot of other grant programs, said Eileen. In terms of friendliness and support, the staff can't be beat, she said.

But beyond that, an awarded grant from CFCI "lends credibility toward an organization," said Eileen. And that, in turn, opens other doors, as it did for Big Picture with the Gilmore Foundation.



As national support dries up or just becomes less reliable, as with the National Endowment for the Arts, local sources of funding are more important than ever.

"There's no Rockefeller here who says, 'I'm going to create this.' The Community Foundation plays that role," said Eileen.

Indeed, funding will always be a challenge for work that struggles with the perception that it's "fluff," nice but unnecessary, said Doug. The Leunigs have personally been involved with the installation of 20 pieces of public art around town. They pay usage rights on the properties they borrow. They help the artists get compensation. They have expenses like anyone else – for basic office necessities like bookkeeping, for insurance, etc.

"I do think the community is catching on," that the arts are good for a community's reputation, good for business, good for quality of life, good for personal health, said Doug. "Your life is better because of art."

Still, "most people don't recognize the community benefits. I'd like to see that changed, and the Community Foundation could have a role in that."

"I would be so bold as to say that the arts exist in central Illinois due to the Community Foundation," said Eileen. "A lot of what we take for granted wouldn't have happened."

"I don't know if godfather is the right word," she continued. "The Community Foundation is the fairy godmother to the arts organizations. We would not be where we are without the Community Foundation. If people like the murals and movie festival and street festival, they can thank the Community Foundation."

THE BIG KAHUNAS

Trillium Place

In 2019, the Human Service Center, UnityPoint Behavioral Health Services and Tazwood Center for Wellness joined forces to create what would become Trillium Place, a not-for-profit organization that provides mental health and addiction services in both inpatient and outpatient settings. Now affiliated with Carle Health, Trillium has locations in Peoria, East Peoria, Pekin, Lincoln and Eureka.

It was a transitional period on the mental health front in central Illinois. The state's Zeller Mental Health Center in Peoria had closed. Mental health was moving toward more of a community-based, outpatient model. There had been leadership changes at the Human Service Center. There was a lot of churn.

That's when Jack Gilligan, the retired CEO of Human Service Center, former Caterpillar Vice President Sid Banwart, former Center for Prevention of Abuse Executive Director Martha Herm, and former Bradley University Vice President and Human Service Center Foundation Board member Gary Anna approached the Community Foundation and Mark Roberts with a proposition.

The Human Service Center was at a critical juncture with all the changes taking place in the local mental health arena: It could keep its own Foundation and the \$16 million it held in assets, which didn't seem to make a lot of sense, or CFCI

could "create some scale and we're effectively happy to go out of business," Anna recalled saying.

Ultimately, that latter option was chosen and the Human Service Center Foundation handed over \$16 million to be invested by CFCI, with support distributed over time to provide sustainability to the new, state-of-the-art community crisis and psychiatric service model being developed locally.

Today, the John F. Gilligan Community-Based Psychiatry Fund and the Community Crisis Center Fund hold a combined \$19.4 million, \$14.62 million in the former, \$4.77 million in the latter, from which Trillium Place receives nearly \$900,000 annually for staffing and psychiatric services.

"We thought it was a win-win" at the time, Anna said. And that perception, especially given CFCI's endowment growth, has only been reinforced since, he says today. Concurring with that is Herm, the former director of the Center for Prevention of Abuse who was on the Human Service Center Board at the time of the merger. With local hospital ownership changing hands, CFCI has been an objective steward and stable source of revenue for mental health services in central Illinois.

Indeed, behavioral health is a driving priority in Peoria.

“IT [BEHAVIORAL HEALTH] CAUSES PEOPLE TO BE HUNGRY. IT CAUSES PEOPLE TO BE HOMELESS. IT CAUSES PEOPLE TO BE UNHEALTHY. IT CAUSES PEOPLE TO COMMIT VIOLENT ACTS. IT'S A BIG DEAL.”

– MARK ROBERTS, PRESIDENT & CEO

Elmer and Adolph Pletsch Memorial Scholarship Fund

Elmer and Adolph Pletsch were two bachelor brothers who spent a lifetime raising livestock and farming the land inherited from their parents in Putnam County.

They were simple, modest people, recalled Gayle Reno, the trustee of their charitable trust whose late father, Fritz Ballerine, was a rural mail carrier who had gotten to know them on his route. "They milked cows and they had chickens," and they and their parents would sell eggs and cream to the community, she said. "Never did you see them that they weren't in bib overalls."

They had a nice, older, two-story brick house, which they heated with coal. They had no TV, no washing machine, and "never would complain, ever," Reno said. They didn't mingle much socially, not that they didn't enjoy the occasional company.

When they died — Elmer in 2007 at age 81, Adolph in 2009 at 90 — they did so with few heirs but with an abiding affection for the community and the specific family, the Ballerines, who had sort of adopted them, moved them into town and helped them manage their affairs in their twilight years.

It was during that time that a local attorney, Paul Perona, and Reno's father sat down with the Pletsches, made them aware of what they had, and talked about what they might want to do with their assets after they were gone, said Reno. The Pletsches had accumulated a relative fortune, between the value of the farmland, the income from it and some railroad and other stock they owned, not that they were all that aware of it.

"They knew what their interests were. They were very giving," Reno recalled. "They'd ask my dad for some guidance. What they needed, they had."

Today the Elmer and Adolph Pletsch Memorial Scholarship Fund, at nearly \$2.9 million, is the Community Foundation's fourth largest. Every year, the Foundation dutifully writes a check to County Line Lutheran Church in Putnam County and to a scholarship fund at Putnam County High School for graduating students seeking ongoing agricultural and related education at a college or trade school of their choosing.

Since its inception in 2012, the program has distributed about \$2 million in scholarships to about 200 students for tuition, room and board and other costs. It comes to about \$150,000 in scholarships annually, which is allocated in \$5,000 awards for students attending two-year colleges or trade schools, and \$20,000 for those enrolling in four-year schools, said Reno. The single-year scholarships have to be applied for every year.

Putnam Schools Superintendent Clay Theisinger credits the scholarships with "creating opportunities and opening doors to colleges and universities that many of our students may not otherwise have been able to attend," while also guiding students "toward fulfilling careers and meaningful lives."

Indeed, it's "a lot of money for a little agricultural community," Reno said. At a recent high school awards night, Reno was watching one of the applicants, the daughter of a single mom, and "I knew she wouldn't be doing this if it weren't for us."

Meanwhile, it's an investment in the community and a dwindling rural lifestyle, as many of these students return home after their education to contribute as farmers and rural bankers and engineers, landscape designers and diesel mechanics, etc.

\$2.9 MILLION
current balance

\$2 MILLION
donated since 2012

200
student grantees

"We spoke about the younger guys getting into farming and they (the Pletsches) would just have smiles on their faces," said Reno.

For Margy Mattern, it's personal. Of her and husband George's four children, three have been recipients of the Pletsch scholarship.

Jon (Class of 2014) used his scholarship to attend Iowa State University to major in agricultural engineering. Today he works for farm equipment manufacturer John Deere out of Des Moines. Anna (Class of 2018) went to the University of Illinois to study agricultural accounting and now works for the Illinois Farm Bureau in Bloomington. Nick (Class of 2021) did two years at a junior college before attending Illinois State University to study ag business and he's the one who will be coming home to Putnam County to run the family farm and livestock operation.

Collectively, they received \$185,000 through the Pletsch scholarships.

"It's almost difficult for me to talk about without getting emotional," not only for her family but for so many others in Putnam County whose children have been able to pursue their farm dreams "without that monkey on their back" in terms of college debt, said Margy.

"We would have tried our best" to put the children through college, she said. "I would say things would have looked different.

"Our hearts are full as parents to see them continuing in the ag field but we'd be lying if we didn't give credit where credit is due," said Margy, whose other daughter, Christine (Class of 2011) originally went into nursing but married a farmer and now runs an orchard in Putnam County.

"If you don't remember anything else that I say, in my opinion this scholarship is doing exactly as the brothers intended. They wanted to promote ag education in our community," said Margy.

She saw it in her own kids. Her youngest son "stood taller. He was proud. You don't always get that in the ag lane. There's a new respect.

"It's been an eye opener at the high school. It gets the kids' attention. It makes them slow down and say, 'I wonder if this applies to me.'

"I can only speak for my kids, but they truly do feel a debt in the best way possible. We would love if all our kids came back to the county, but to see them offer their skills through their lives to support farmers and agriculture ... they have accomplished what they set out to do. What a blessing.

"I know you can hear my heart."



Gilmore Fund

Before former Caterpillar President Bob Gilmore died in 2020, he had conversations with Roberts about entrusting CFCI with some of his money. “He asked us to do three things,” said Roberts. “Support arts and culture, community wellness and workforce retention and creation.”

Later that year, following Gilmore’s death at age 100, his estate gave the Foundation \$3.9 million to do just that. It was and remains CFCI’s largest single donation from an individual or family.

Per Gilmore’s wishes, one-time grants totaling \$500,000 were made from the fund to First Federated Church and to the Illinois Central College Educational Foundation to provide student scholarships.

At the time, Roberts noted that Gilmore’s gift “leaves a legacy of caring and compassion for making central Illinois a better place,” while serving as “an example of how to help advance CFCI’s capacity to meet the community’s most



Bob Gilmore | 2020 Portrait by David Vernon

pressing needs and compelling opportunities, year after year, forever.”

Today, the Gilmore Fund stands at \$3.75 million and distributes more than \$165,000 to various causes annually. In an interesting side note, at the time the Gilmore estate made the donation, the Foundation’s assets stood at \$66 million, meaning they have grown almost 40 percent in little more than five years.

Evidently, Gilmore’s instincts regarding the Foundation’s stewardship were well-placed.



*Lori Nevells, Kristal Roop, and Lea Anne Miller
(Women’s Fund Advisory Board Members)
2019 Annual Meeting*

Women’s Fund

If the Community Foundation has a steady Eddy – make that a steady Edie – it’s the Women’s Fund.

The brainchild of Pat Barton, the Civic Center’s Debbie Ritschel, Donna Haerr and concert promoter Jay Goldberg, it started in 1993 with a \$2,000 donation from the Women’s Lifestyle Show and has blossomed in the years since to a top-10 fund success story, managed and financed largely by women for women’s causes.

In 2015, the Women’s Fund was the point of entry to the Community Foundation for Lea Anne Miller, who now chairs the CFCI Board.



Women's Fund Advisory Board and CFCI Staff | 2026 Legacy of Leadership Reception

"I love the Women's Fund," said Miller, who got her introduction to non-profits there from a career in corporate America, at State Farm. "Women run the household. They need support."

Miller mentions the Loving Bottoms Diaper Bank in Galesburg, which provides more than 40,000 diapers monthly to families in need across west-central Illinois.

"You don't realize what a huge need that is," said Miller, but the Women's Fund did in recognizing it with a grant. "You've got to have a lot of grit and patience and sticking to get other organizations to also help out. It amazes me how resourceful they are," she said.

The female empowerment component also was a big draw for Barb Gurtler, who established a donor-advised fund with her husband, Homer, a Caterpillar manager, in 1994, which is now nearly \$1.1 million strong. At 91 years young – she had just come from a pickleball match when the Foundation spoke with her – Gurtler said she and Homer had been focusing their volunteer time and generosity on what was then Common Place, now Neighborhood House.

They kept hearing good things about the Community Foundation, and "finally, we put a chunk of money here," she said matter-of-factly.

That chunk was followed by other chunks, which went to an ever-changing list of recipients, none more constant than the Women's Fund. Its fundraising had plateaued somewhat, never quite climbing to the \$1 million that had been its goal for two decades until a large gift from Barb in 2022 put the Women's Fund over the top.

"We just decided to invest in it and we haven't been sorry," said Gurtler. As to why, "Well, because it's women."

Over the years, what started as a visionary effort to unite 1,000 women in contributing \$1,000 apiece has awarded more than 170 grants totaling a half-million dollars plus. It now pours about \$60,000 annually back into the community.

For Roberts, who's witnessed the endowment at the Women's Fund grow from just south of \$300,000 when he started to north of \$1.5 million today, the group and its "very savvy and driven" leadership have proved something of an inspiration.

"The Women's Fund is hands down one of the best things we do at the Foundation," said Roberts, adding that its annual Leaders Luncheon, with up to 500 attendees, is among CFCI's biggest draws. "It's the very visible involvement and activity of the women who make up the fund."

OTHER NOTABLE EFFORTS

Wholesome Food Fund/Ending Hunger Together

It was 2012 when Roberts ran across Community Word editor and former Journal Star reporter Clare Howard, who mentioned to him how positive it could be if the Community Foundation could have some role in augmenting the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits for those buying fresh produce at Peoria's Riverfront Market.

The ensuing collaboration, named the Wholesome Food Fund, would allocate all tax-deductible donations to the fund to doubling the value of food stamp dollars spent on fresh, locally grown food sold at the farmers market.

And just like that, "we doubled the amount of fresh food" going to some of the most vulnerable citizens in the region, said Roberts.

As Howard would write in the Community Word, about 43,000 people in Peoria, Tazewell and Woodford counties were enrolled in the SNAP program, according to the Illinois Department of Human Services. The average benefit for Illinoisans was \$139 a month; do the math and that comes to some \$6 million a month being pumped into the local economy. Shifting even a portion of that to local farmers markets was great not only for recipients, who now had better access to fresh, nutritious food, but for local growers, a two-fer if ever there was.

Meanwhile, given that much of what's sold at the market is organic, the program is good for the environment, as well, wrote Howard. Consider it a three-fer, then.



*CFCI update with U.S. Representative Darin LaHood
Darin LaHood, Julie Schifeling, Mark Roberts, Matt Gross, and Don Forrest*

Meanwhile, given skyrocketing obesity and chronic disease rates, which are directly linked to diet, eating healthy, local foods also reduces health care costs, wrote Howard. OK, so four-fer.

In fact, addressing food insecurity/scarcity has long been a priority of the Community Foundation through its Ending Hunger Together program.

Since 2019, the program, with board members from nine communities in Peoria, Tazewell and Woodford Counties, has granted a total of \$270,000 to three organizations dedicated to alleviating food insecurity. The Ending Hunger Together program is among the best examples of CFCI's collaborative approach, said Schifeling.

“Like Mark said, we don’t do the work, but we can bring people together. What are you doing? How are you doing that? We’re a community of the size that things can be done,” she said, noting that the Foundation worked with groups such as Washington Helps Its People (WHIP) in Washington, the Mennonite Church pantry in Metamora, Bread for America, etc.

Meanwhile, the Community Foundation can step up when government can’t or won’t. With the cuts in the federal food stamps program, for example, anti-hunger initiatives are more important than ever, said Lea Anne Miller, the current CFCI Board president.



Amanda Fiske, Sarah Fletcher, Nora Sullivan, Christa Staley, Mark Roberts, Lea Anne Miller, Don Shafer, and Will Ball
2026 Midwest Food Bank Tour and Grant Check Presentation

Fogelberg Fund

‘We couldn’t have done it without them’

Hugh Higgins was a teenager attending Peoria High when he first heard rival Woodruff High alum Dan Fogelberg in concert at age 16. He was hooked.

“I was a budding singer/songwriter myself,” Higgins recalled. From there on, he would follow Fogelberg’s career closely, lean into the latter’s lyrics, learn how to play guitar himself, even loan Fogelberg his high-end Martin D-41 acoustic guitar following a chance meeting at a Peoria nightclub in the 1990s.

So, when Fogelberg fell victim to prostate cancer in 2007, “it was like a personal blow,” said Higgins. “It made me very sad.”

Thereafter Higgins became active in a group trying to preserve Fogelberg’s legacy. He read about a memorial that fans of singer/songwriter John Denver had installed in Colorado, and immediately thought, “Wouldn’t that be a great thing to do for Dan?” here in Peoria.

With an eye on creating some kind of public statement on Grandview Drive, Higgins & Co. were able to raise about \$3,500 toward a \$10,000

fundraising goal, but then they hit a wall. They reached out to other Fogelberg fan sites online, and got some advice: “They thought it would be best if we had a vessel, a receivership, where people could donate and get a tax deduction.”

Enter the Community Foundation, which in 2009 established a fund on their behalf for a small fee while investing the proceeds, which quickly shot up more than four-fold, to \$15,000 generated “from England, from Sweden, all over the nation,” said Higgins.

Ultimately, most of that money was spent on a monument to Fogelberg in Peoria’s Riverfront Park. Later, the Fogelberg Foundation of Peoria, where Higgins sits on the board of directors, would erect another memorial in Forest Park in Peoria Heights with money it had raised separately, but that experience with the Community Foundation was a reaffirming one, said Higgins.

“We couldn’t have done it without them. It gave us a great sense of legitimacy,” Higgins says today. “That gave great confidence to our donors. It was a wonderful experience.”

A smorgasbord of causes.

It can be humbling to see a full list of all the lives and programs touched by the Community inner Foundation in one fashion or another.

When a 3-year-old boy drowned in the Illinois River near the RiverPlex in 2015 while on a field trip with his daycare group, the tragedy really touched Owen and Carol Ackerman. “That always hit me,” said Owen, who has remained a competitive swimmer well into his 80s. “We have to do something to prevent that.” The Ackermans would later create the Learn to Swim Fund at CFCI specifically targeted at disadvantaged, inner-city youth.

That’s just one example of something that happened – not uncommonly a tragedy, but sometimes just a personal interest – that touched someone strongly enough for them to do something about it.

The Vernon “Butch” Gudat Scholarship Fund, named after the Peoria firefighter who lost his life in the line of duty in 1983, for example, provides educational assistance for the children and grandchildren of career and volunteer firefighters in Peoria, Tazewell and Woodford counties.

Child welfare funds abound, from the Children’s Home to CASA of the Tenth Judicial Circuit, which advocates for children in the court system who are wards of the state. There are funds for suicide prevention and Alzheimer’s awareness. Multiple funds support the visual arts and the performing arts, from music to ballet. Education and literacy programs are popular. Some schools have their own funds, including the Valeska Hinton Early Childhood Center and the Washington School (now Reservoir) for Gifted Education.

The City of Peoria has a Sister City Fund. Historic preservation at Springdale Cemetery gets a boost through a designated fund. Animal welfare is important to a lot of people. The Hult Center for Healthy Living has its own fund, as does the Wheels O’ Time Museum. Once upon a time, CFCI was a part owner of the Peoria Chiefs after a couple of retired Caterpillar executives left it their shares in the team.

Meanwhile, “opportunity grants” for non-profits face challenges delivering their services. Roberts recalls a women’s shelter, for example, that had a bed bug problem. It was CFCI to the rescue, providing \$1,000 to get their mattresses cleaned.



2026 Vernon “Butch” Gudat Scholarship Fund Scholarship Ceremony | Mike Gudat, Michele Gudat, and Scholarship Recipients



In so many ways, CFCI has proven itself “disproportionately impactful” because funds can be produced exactly when they’re needed, not a second too late, said Roberts.

On the flip side, it can seem like the impact of the Community Foundation is diluted simply because it does so much for so many. Ah, but that’s by design.

“A community foundation should be broadly representative of the community and spread money to lots of deserving organizations,” said Karl Kuppler, who likewise has a fund with his wife, Cheryl.

“By pooling resources from a variety of people, you can make a contribution to a cause that can be pretty impactful,” added Jim Fassino. One good general can build an army. “You give 20 percent to a cause and others come up with 80 percent.”

“I’m a donor to the Community Foundation and several other charities. What I can say about the Community Foundation is that if I have a desire to set up a fund and I’d like to have some say, I can engage directly,” said incoming Board Chairman Will Ball. “I think it’s a well-oiled machine. Small but mighty.”

“A COMMUNITY FOUNDATION SHOULD BE BROADLY REPRESENTATIVE OF THE COMMUNITY AND SPREAD MONEY TO LOTS OF DESERVING ORGANIZATIONS.”

– KARL KUPPLER

PATS ON THE BACK



The organization and staff that expend so much effort recognizing others have received some recognitions of their own over the years. Here is a partial list:

- **1993** — Association of Fundraising Professionals Central Illinois Chapter Outstanding Philanthropic Organization
- **2016** — CWTC Pathway Award Business Partnership Award
- **2017** — Association of Fundraising Professionals Central Illinois Chapter Special Recognition: Women's Fund
- **2018** — Association of Fundraising Professionals Central Illinois Chapter Ian T. Sturrock Outstanding Fundraising Executive: Mark Roberts
- **2022** — The Peoria Area Chamber Community Wealth Award
- **2024** — Arts Partners Arts Partner of the Year Award
- **2025** — YMCA Business Impact Award
- **2025** — Association of Fundraising Professionals Central Illinois Chapter Giving Heart Award: Emerging Philanthropists Fund



Patricia Barton (Founder's Award Recipient) and Mark Roberts | 2017 Annual Meeting

Meanwhile, the Council on Foundations, the national accrediting agency, had this to say: "The Community Foundation of Central Illinois is a proud member of the Community Foundations National Standards program – meaning that they have proven to uphold a commitment to rigorous, sector-driven best practices that exceed federal and state law requirements and demonstrate accountability and excellence to communities, policymakers, and the public.

"CFCI has positively impacted the lives of residents in its region for over 40 years, and as the foundation recognizes granting more than \$7.5 million in 2025, the largest amount since its founding, it's clear that it will continue to make central Illinois a better place for the long term."

Over the years, meanwhile, CFCI has acknowledged many of those who have gone above and beyond in their contributions. Since 2003, its Founders Award has gone to:

- **2003** – Caterpillar Inc.
- **2005** – Gordon and Jean Peters
- **2006** – Gene and Harriett Swager
- **2011** – Donna Haerr
- **2012** – Jerold I. Horn
- **2014** – Edward W. Siebert
- **2016** – John Sahn
- **2017** – Patricia Barton
- **2018** – Women's Fund
- **2019** – Estate of Jean M. Brown
- **2022** – Estate of Robert E. Gilmore
- **2023** – Barbara Gurtler
- **2024** – John and Sharon Amdall
- **2026** – Owen and Carole Ackerman

Finally, there may be no bigger compliment than the director of another community foundation depositing his own funds with a peer/competitor. Last year, Dan Templin, a Peoria native who is now executive director of the DeKalb County Community Foundation, along with his brother and sister established the Bernie and Marta Vonachen Templin Fund in honor of their parents. The endowed fund will support health care services throughout central Illinois, in memory of "their lives of selfless service to others in our community."



*Mark Roberts, Dan Templin, and Scott Witzig
2026 Annual Meeting*

THE NEXT 40

Histories are for looking behind, for peeking in the rearview mirror to acknowledge the trials and tribulations of the learning years while celebrating the accomplishments that followed. Survival allows you to do that, to have that perspective. Those who wish to build true legacies, however, never stop looking forward, with an eye on posterity.

The leadership of the Community Foundation wants to stay relevant, intends to stay relevant. That means confronting the challenges that still loom while also being open to opportunities as they present themselves.

From the perspective of the present, what needs to be addressed are how CFCI can play a role in the rise of satellite community foundations, how it can withstand the cultural changes revolving around philanthropy in general, how it can tap into the generational transfer of wealth that is now occurring, how it can grow its unrestricted funds to better prepare itself to respond quickly to crises, how it can grow its visibility and how it keeps up with technological advancements.

Meanwhile, succession planning is a must.

Like a good neighbor, CFCI is there (and can be even more).

It is a relationship of mutual benefit: Local communities form their own foundations, raise money for their own unique needs, but rely on the CFCI for mentorship, back-office management such as bookkeeping and auditing, and investment of those dollars on their behalf.

That's what has happened in Morton, Washington and Forman Valley.

The Washington Community Foundation was born out of a catastrophic event, the tornado of 2013. The community had suffered this unimaginable disaster, people from all over wanted to help and the dollars and goods came pouring in, but there was no receiving organization in place and little idea how to spend it where it could do the most good, especially in the overwhelmingness of the moment.

Into that void stepped CFCI, ultimately raising \$1.6 million in all, including \$500,000 from the McCormick Foundation up front, and distributing it over the next five years following conversations with local stakeholders.

"The tornado was the first out-of-the-box thing they did," and it included an attitude that "we didn't go into it thinking we had all the answers," said Schifeling.

"One of the things we knew, the grant-making has to be collaborative. Let's start talking to people."

By 2018, the Long-Term Recovery Group's funds were exhausted, but the community still had needs and there was a sense of momentum and lessons learned.

Today, the Washington Community Foundation has about 20 funds, with its endowment nearing \$1 million, said Matt Moehle, its board president and a local banker.

WCF has done a lot of work with its four school districts. If one of them needs \$100,000 for new technology or a new playground or anything that isn't covered by their regular budgets, WCF can help them get there, he said.

"This is long-term giving. It's not giving to the Foundation. It's giving through the Foundation," said Moehle. "Your gift keeps giving to meet your passion. It's going to give today and it's going to give tomorrow." And over time, it's "going to exceed your original gift," he said.

"There's nothing like that in town."

CFCI oversees that money, and when Washington needs it, CFCI is a phone call away. "It's been a great relationship," said Moehle. "We wouldn't be able to function without them."

Still, it can be hard to break down "the silos" that have developed over the years where every organization wants to do its own thing and where everybody is "doing all this fundraising all the time" from a finite pot of money, said Moehle. As a result, there remain "giving gaps" in the

community. Few charitable organizations engage in future planning. There is duplication of effort. The key is to "help maximize" that effort.

"I don't want to step on your toes," said Moehle. "We want to collaborate, convene. Our mission is to improve the quality of life for Washingtonians now and for generations to come."

And over time, that's the model local Foundation leaders would like to see replicated and expanded elsewhere, with CFCI serving as a non-profit resource center.

Communities such as Washington "can do more with the dollars because you don't have to cover overhead," said Shafer. "You're always looking at a way to connect people and organizations ... to make the whole greater than the pieces."

So a guy walks into a cocktail party...

The Community Foundation of Central Illinois may no longer be "the best kept secret in town" but there is always room for a higher profile.

"I would like nothing more than to walk into a cocktail party and pick 10 random people, and eight of those people know exactly what I'm talking about when I talk about the Community Foundation of Central Illinois," said Will, CFCI's board chairman in waiting.

"If you're Children's Hospital, everybody knows what you're doing and nobody wants kids to be sick," added Roberts. But with an organization that gives money to non-profits, "there are no heart strings attached to that."

Getting the word out, especially in a fragmented media environment, will remain an ongoing challenge. Testimonies like those from Sharon and John Amdall certainly help the cause.

Indeed, few people have been more involved with the Community Foundation over a longer period of time or have a greater feel and appreciation for what it is and what it does, than the Amdalls.

"We hope CFCI is around for hundreds of years, with more funds and managing more investments from more donors to continue to improve our communities through a myriad of initiatives," they said in a statement.



Will Ball, Lea Anne Brown, Mark Roberts, Julie Schifeling, and Stacey Peterson | 2024 Fall Grants Celebration

Boomers out, Gen X and Y in.

The question of the moment for nonprofits and charities everywhere is how to tap into the transfer of wealth that is occurring, with Baby Boomers leaving inheritances to their children and grandchildren.

A recent local study showed that some \$15 billion just in the Foundation's immediate service area is expected to be handed over this decade alone, by 2030, said Roberts. And disturbingly, "the wealth created in this community is increasingly not staying in the community," he said.

Some of the changes may be cultural.

"A significant base of Boomers, like me, that have the resources to be able to provide ... I don't know if that's true of the next generation. I don't know if they have the same need to donate and contribute," said Shafer. Once upon a time, major local employers used to encourage their workers to be involved in their communities, but that's not as true anymore, either, he said.

That said, there are pockets of those who say, "This community has been good to us. We want to ensure the long-term prosperity of the community we love," said Roberts.

And one way to do that is to entrust those funds to the Community Foundation, he said.

"If everybody left 5 percent of their estate, we could grow the endowment to \$750 million," said Roberts. With \$200 million, meanwhile, "we could really do something."

"It's very real and very worrisome," said Roberts. "We no longer have old-school philanthropists. It's increasingly going to be a big deal."

Developing relationships with local attorneys and financial advisors who help their clients with estate planning is one option.

"We increasingly have a full estate planning pipeline" where people "include the Foundation in their will," said Roberts. "You don't know when it's going to happen, whether it's 10 or 25 years from now."

Meanwhile, the Illinois Legislature has given an assist to community foundations with its Illinois Gives Tax Credit Act, which provides a 25% state income tax credit to individuals and businesses donating to permanent, non-donor-advised endowment funds at qualified community foundations. Springfield's goal is to encourage up to \$100 million in new giving over five years, with a special emphasis on reaching rural areas. No single community foundation may receive more than \$3 million in eligible donations annually, but every little bit helps.

Once upon a time in Peoria, when the community needed something, it knew exactly where to go: the Caterpillar Foundation, the Bielfeldt Foundation, maybe the Gilmore Foundation, said Gary Anna, who learned a bit about running capital campaigns when he was CFO at Bradley University. Today, things have splintered.

The community needs a good steward, and the Community Foundation has stepped into that role, he said, but moving forward, there may come a time for a more proactive, rather than reactive, approach. "Is the Community Foundation a catalyst for change or a repository for progress? That's a question for the next 20 years," said Anna.

“IF EVERYBODY LEFT 5 PERCENT OF THEIR ESTATE, WE COULD GROW THE ENDOWMENT TO \$750 MILLION.”

— MARK ROBERTS, PRESIDENT & CEO

'A finger on the pulse'

"I think it's important for the Community Foundation to have its finger on the pulse of what's happening."

So says current CFCI Board Chairwoman Lea Anne Miller, who acknowledges that a big step in that direction is that "the Board needs to be reflective of the community."

That means not only diversification in terms of race and gender but in terms of age and geographic location, as well.

The Board could use more people in their 30s and 40s who may bring a different perspective as to what the community's needs are. More folks from outside Peoria also would be a benefit, though the Board is speckled with members from around the region now, including Elmwood, Morton, Washington and Trivoli.

Reaching out into rural areas is especially important to soon-to-be chairman Ball, who grew up in Berryville, Va., population 4,500 give or take. Too many needs in rural communities, some of them desperate, are going unaddressed, he said, and more of "a 360-degree view" could change that reality.



By the same token, "we're an urban community. We have challenges like every other urban community does," said Bashir Ali, Board chairman from 2013-15. "Those challenges evolve. Some issues we've been fighting for decades."

Again, Gurtler cuts to the chase.

"They've got their feelers out everywhere" as to what the community's needs are, she said. "At the moment, they've got it covered, and they will keep covering it."

Who will be the next CEO?

Mark Roberts has 18 years in as CEO of CFCI and given the track record over that time, no doubt many would like to extend that stay, but there comes a time for everyone and organizations, good ones, outlast their leaders.

"Succession planning is absolutely number one" in terms of priorities, said Ball.

And succession planning goes hand in hand with strategic planning.

Even though it's a charity, CFCI must continue to take a business approach, said Ball. "All of these needs vs. limited resources. How do we figure out what's on the upper right quadrant of the model? How do you go about developing a service model that has the highest impact for the highest need?"

The needs remain abundant: disparities in health care distribution, shortages of affordable housing, homelessness, youth violence, people and workers left behind by technological advancements. Ball talks about wanting to "teach people how to fish."

Outside of the basic human needs of food, clothing and shelter, "people want to live meaningful lives so they can support their families in a meaningful way," he said.

Fundamentally, how do we build sustainable families?

And how does the Community Foundation of Central Illinois stay relevant five, 10, 20 years from now?

"You just never know" with charities and non-profits, said Kuppler. "Some last for 100 years but many come and go."

In other communities such as Cleveland and Chicago and Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids, "those community foundation-like entities were able to bring people together to assess community needs that would potentially change over time," said Kuppler. "Peoria today is not the Peoria from 40 years ago and won't be the Peoria 40 years hence.

"The great advantage is that a community foundation can and should, if it is operated well, morph."

At present, CFCI has a leader who is fully on board with that. For Roberts, the one sin is sitting still.

"I'm not wired that way," he said. "You never stop making things better. That's the reason for our success. We never rest on our laurels."

“CFCI HAS THE PERFECT MISSION STATEMENT: ‘CONNECTING PEOPLE WHO CARE WITH CAUSES THAT MATTER.’ THAT IS THE ESSENCE/SOUL OF THE PLACE.”

– SHARON & JOHN AMDALL

Representing 'the goodness of Peoria,' now and into the future.

As the Community Foundation approaches the start of its fifth decade, there is every reason to have a sunny outlook.

The \$100 million milestone for the endowment looms.

"With the growth in resources of the Community Foundation, it is uniquely positioned to be at the table to solve problems in our community that a couple of decades ago, it wasn't," said Ball.

In short, the foundation has been firmly established at the Foundation.

So, what does the Foundation mean to the community? How would we know it if it did not exist and never had?

"The grants they give, for goodness' sake. I think it would be missed a lot," said Gurtler, who has learned a thing or two in her nine decades.



*Bashir Ali, Mark Roberts, and Christopher Glynn
2013 Annual Meeting*

"It would be more than a missing tooth," said Glynn, "because the monies come from people who are largely local and go to people with needs who are largely local. Then you go back to the millions of dollars that have been made over the course of the years.

"Were it not for the Community Foundation and its ability to designate in that fashion, they might not give at all. The Community Foundation plays a pretty darn important role."

"If it wasn't there, I think it would be a slow, aortic leak" for many of the causes that the Community Foundation champions with its grants, said Disharoon.

It comes down to this:

"If someone passes on and has an estate, they can rest assured that people of integrity are good shepherds of that resource. They have a system in place to solve problems and address community needs. It's about the goodness of the heart and the competence of the people and a strong system that has proven itself over time," said Ali.

"It really represents the goodness of Peoria."

Sharon and John Amdall bring it full circle.

"CFCI has the perfect mission statement: 'Connecting people who care with causes that matter.' That is the essence/soul of the place," they said.

"CFCI is wonderful! ... Don't know what we would do without them."

SOURCES

Contributors

- Owen and Carole Ackerman, longtime CFCI fundholders and contributors, 2026 Founders Award winners
- Cara Allen, vice president of communications, Community Foundation of Central Illinois
- Bashir Ali, former workforce development director, City of Peoria, resident Imam, Muslim Education & Community Association (MECA), past CFCI Board chairman
- Sharon and John Amdall, philanthropists, retired from Caterpillar, 2024 Founders Award winners
- Gary Anna, retired senior vice president for business affairs, Bradley University, former Human Service Center Foundation Board member
- Randy Atchley, executive director, Adult & Teen Challenge Greater Midwest
- Will Ball, vice president of Caterpillar Foundation, retired, CFCI Board member, incoming chairman
- Council on Foundations, national accrediting agency for community foundations and other nonprofits
- John Disharoon, retired director of market access, Caterpillar, former CFCI Board chairman
- Barbara Mantz Drake, retired opinion page editor, Peoria Journal Star, author of first history of Community Foundation, "20 Years of Giving"
- Jim Fassino, retired bank president, former Long-Term Recovery Group chairman, former CFCI Board chairman
- Don Forrest, senior director of business development, Farnsworth Group, former CFCI Board chairman
- Christopher Glynn, director and program manager, Caterpillar, former CFCI Board chairman
- Barbara Gurtler, longtime Community Foundation fundholder and contributor, especially to Women's Fund, 2023 Founders Award winner
- Martha Herm, retired executive director, Center for Prevention of Abuse (Tri-County WomenStrength), former board member, Human Service Center
- Hugh Higgins, owner, Hearth restaurant, co-founder, Fogelberg Foundation of Peoria
- Karl Kuppler, retired partner at law firm Hasselberg, Rock, Bell & Kuppler LLP, former CFCI Board chairman
- Doug and Eileen Leunig, founders of Big Picture Initiative
- Gary Manier, former mayor, City of Washington
- Margy Mattern, parent of Elmer & Adolph Pletsch Memorial Scholarship recipients

- Donna Marcacci, retired banker, PNC Bank, former CFCI Board chairwoman
- Carol Merna, CEO, Center for Prevention of Abuse
- Lea Anne Miller, director of financial services, State Farm, CFCI Board chairwoman
- Matt Moehle, board president, Washington Community Foundation, vice president and co-manager of Washington Community Bank
- Valerie Moehle, attorney, former CFCI Board chairwoman
- Gayle Reno, trustee of Elmer & Adolph Pletsch Charitable Trust, active with memorial scholarship fund at Putnam County High School
- Mark Roberts, president and CEO, Community Foundation of Central Illinois
- Joe Rogers, COO, Adult & Teen Challenge Greater Midwest
- John Sahn, retired attorney in private practice, former vice president and general counsel, Central Illinois Light Co. (CILCORP), former CEO, J.C. Proctor Endowment, former CFCI Board chairman, 2016 Founders Award winner
- Julie Schifeling, two-time CFCI Board member, paralegal at RLI, adjunct professor at Bradley University, longtime community activist
- Chris Setti, CEO, Greater Peoria Economic Development Council, former CFCI Board chairman, co-founder Impact Investing Program
- Don Shafer, former senior vice president, PNC and Heartland Banks, educator (Illinois Central College, two-time CFCI Board member
- Doug Shannon, wealth management advisor at WestPoint Financial Group, co-founder of Emerging Philanthropists Fund and its board's first chairman
- Clay Theisinger, superintendent, Putnam County Community Unit School District 535

Publications

- Annual Reports: 2006-2025
- First Community Foundation history, "20 Years of Giving" by Barbara Mantz Drake
- The Community Word
- The Journal Star
- Peoria Magazine
- Prairie Living magazine
- Various other publications



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