

BTCF

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life here even better

Spring 2022



COLUMBIA COUNTY

Bridging Divides, Healing Communities

Grantees create connections across race and culture

Berkshire
Taconic
Community
Foundation

When mass protests broke out around the world following the murder of George Floyd, Roxanne Wilkins knew it was time to start a local conversation about systemic racism and oppression.

The Philmont, N.Y., resident has worked with families in crisis in educational and social service settings for decades. She's also a racial justice advocate who, since arriving in Columbia County in the 1980s, has navigated being a woman of color raising children in a predominantly white region. Her first-born son, Loki Anthony, returned to the area after serving in the military to contribute his own time and talents, inspired by his mother's legacy of service.

"I'm 70 years old now," Roxanne reflected recently. "And I have been watching this stuff go on since the '60s."

BTCF's Bridging Divides, Healing Communities initiative supports community-building efforts through grants, a speaker series and a youth film challenge to bring people together and drive positive change at the local level.

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Message from Leadership



Spring is a time of renewal and change. In these pages, you will read how we are working with inspiring partners to take new directions and engage our communities with fresh eyes.

Our Bridging Divides, Healing Communities initiative is driving positive change at the local level by supporting efforts that build relationships and trust in a time of increasing polarization and division. On our cover, meet mother-and-son grantees who are using discussions, youth groups and hip-hop to create connections across race and culture in Columbia County.

We are dedicated to supporting organizations as they transform in the wake of the pandemic. In northwest Litchfield County, we are funding a program that is giving nonprofit leaders the tools to adapt and thrive in the face of challenge. In northeast Dutchess County, grantees are changing lives in the growing immigrant community by helping these neighbors navigate support systems, gain new skills and establish themselves in their towns.

Our generous donors make this work possible. A Berkshire County couple is dedicating their time and philanthropy to helping us break down barriers and increase access to the arts for all residents.

Together, we are expanding the role of philanthropy as a force for change.



Peter Taylor
President

Snapshot

Greenagers recently received a grant from the South Berkshire County Fund to provide pathways to trade-related careers for local high school students. Participants receive hands-on experience and connections to apprenticeships in a variety of fields, including carpentry, plumbing and electrical work.





NORTHEAST DUTCHESS COUNTY

Grants Expand Services for Immigrant Community

Funding helps residents navigate school, work and their rights

Grace Immigrant Outreach Executive Director Evelyn Garzetta, right, and Program Director Mark Clizbe provide services for immigrant communities in northeast Dutchess County.

Northeast Dutchess County is slowly becoming a more diverse region. Motivated by a desire to welcome growing populations of immigrant communities as neighbors and contributors to local economies, the advisory committee of BTCF's Northeast Dutchess Fund and key donor partners are creating pathways to help these residents navigate local support systems, gain new skills and become active participants in their towns.

Through its NEDCorps program, which is an initiative to increase financial self-sufficiency in the region, the fund has awarded \$70,000 over the past two years to nonprofit organizations that are developing new programs and expanding services for immigrants in northeast Dutchess County. Grace Immigrant Outreach in Millbrook recently received a grant to launch one-on-one mentoring sessions for high school students, as well as host a leadership program exclusively for women.

The tutoring sessions are the brainchild of Mark Clizbe, the new program director of Grace

Immigrant Outreach. A former Millbrook School teacher, he is passionate about helping immigrant students become more effective and independent learners. "The idea is to take students through the end of their education, through college if necessary, and give them the information they need to advocate for themselves in schools," Mark said.

"Mark also connects with the families, which is very important," added Evelyn Garzetta, the organization's executive director. She emphasized that many parents and guardians need help maneuvering the unfamiliar systems in their towns and schools. Mark will guide students and their families through the process of preparing for the transition to work or applying to college, as well as accessing resources to help pay for tuition and expenses.

The women's leadership program is still in development, but Evelyn intends to provide Chromebooks for 10 women from Amenia, Dover, Millbrook, Millerton and Pine Plains. Group members will participate in workshops on how to conduct internet research, write proposals

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Jane Rodd leads a 4-H program that mentors and nurtures youth.



Children learned about farm animals during an event funded by the Northeast Dutchess Fund's NEDCorps program.

*“There are
resources available
in our communities.*

*We are trying
to make it easier
for immigrant families
to connect with
those resources.”*

—Mark Clizbe,
Grace Immigrant Outreach
Program Director

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and hone their public speaking skills to help them become the “leaders of the future” for their communities.

Cornell Cooperative Extension of Dutchess County, another grantee, works closely with Grace Immigrant Outreach on its 4-H Mentoring and Nurturing Youth program. CCEDC runs after-school activities that provide a safe space where children of immigrants and asylum seekers can get support with social-emotional, academic and life skills development.

Program Leader Jane Rodd says that working with livestock engages elementary school children of all backgrounds. “We’re building in a cultural element, which encourages the kids to share things about their culture and break down barriers,” she said. During one session with chickens, participants shared their favorite egg dishes while bilingual children translated the discussion. “They felt connected with each other,” Jane said.

Other multi-year grantees include Legal Services of the Hudson Valley, which offers free counsel in civil matters to low-income clients, and Worker Justice Center of New York, which is providing know-your-rights education to workers and ensuring access to legal assistance for those whose rights are violated.

In 2020, grantee Gateway to Entrepreneurial Tomorrows presented a series of Spanish-language webinars on understanding the basics of financial planning. Their work will continue with an award from BTCF’s Community Fund for Camino a la Prosperidad (Pathway to Prosperity), a four-part program for women and youth focused on empowerment, life skills and entrepreneurship. According to a report from the organizers, these community members “are eager and ready to not just receive information, but to own their futures and start their own projects and businesses. They need encouragement, training and a guiding hand.” ■

BERKSHIRE COUNTY

Portraits of Generosity

From arts to agriculture, philanthropy is a passion for Pittsfield couple

Carol and Michael Riordan of Pittsfield are celebrating their 49th wedding anniversary this year. For nearly half of their marriage, the couple has helped their community thrive through their donor advised fund at BTCF.

“Berkshire Taconic makes it easy to give, and it matches organizations with our interests,” Michael said. Those interests include agriculture, the environment and the arts, which they express through grants to organizations such as Berkshire Agricultural Ventures and service at nonprofits like the Lake Onota Preservation Association, where Michael serves as chair. Their passion for arts and culture in the Berkshires stretches back to a summer trip to Tanglewood when they started dating.

This dedication to the arts is evident in their home, where they expanded their art studio after taking ceramics classes at ISI83 Art School of the Berkshires. Inspired by the nonprofit’s work, they made a gift to provide much-needed equipment. Carol also discovered Community Access to the Arts through BTCF. Her philanthropy regularly supports their mission to celebrate the creativity of people with disabilities, and she now sits on their board.

“There are so many organizations in the Berkshires that serve an important need in the community,” Carol said. “These are places where anyone’s generosity can make a difference.”

“We’re part of the community, and we want to be able to help where we can.”

The Riordans are also ardent supporters of BTCF’s Arts Build Community initiative. Carol serves as a member of its volunteer advisory committee that awards grants to arts and cultural nonprofits. “These organizations are trying to engage more members of the community by breaking down barriers,” Carol said, noting that she has found it inspirational to see these projects in action.

Carol and Michael want to instill the importance of philanthropy in the next generation. Each Christmas, they give their nine nieces and nephews a gift and match it with a donation to a charity in the young person’s name. “We’ve been very lucky,” Michael said. “We have an obligation to share some of that fortune to help others. It’s very simple.” ■

Chore Service Executive Director Jane MacLaren, left, and Program Director Patti Palermo help provide stay-at-home services for seniors and residents with disabilities.

NORTHWEST LITCHFIELD COUNTY

Adapting and Thriving in the Face of Challenge

Program helps nonprofits focus on change

Staff and board from 15 nonprofits in northwest Connecticut are participating in a six-month capacity-building program focused on adapting and innovating in response to pandemic-related challenges, with funding from BTCF and a foundation collaborative that was established to aid recovery in the sector. One member is Chore Service, which is marking its 30th year of providing non-medical care to seniors and residents with disabilities in the Northwest Corner so they may remain safely and independently at home. Executive Director Jane MacLaren sat down with us to discuss the group and the challenges her organization is facing.

Why did Chore Service join this adaptive leadership group?

Staying connected in a rural area is important, especially during these isolating times. I don't think anyone is sure what a post-pandemic world will look like. We are all looking at challenges we might have going forward, and sometimes it's not easy to pinpoint what those challenges might be. This group gives us a chance to look at the root cause and take on the process of change.

What are the benefits of collaborating and learning with your peers?

It's helpful to know that we are all experiencing the same issues and to know that these organizations are taking a hard look at their work. How can we do better? How can we engage more with our board? How do we provide additional services? Where are the gaps? It strikes me how creative others have been during the pandemic. It's risky to think outside the

box. This program allows us to identify challenges and take a practical approach.

Are there issues you specifically hope to address during this program?

We are facing a labor shortage. How do we retain our workers? How do we attract qualified applicants to make sure we meet the needs of our clients and provide employment to people in our region? We also want to engage more with our community. We are unique in the respect that we don't turn anyone away for their ability to pay. We need to continue that outreach, as well as manage rising costs.

How has the pandemic affected your work?

We have instituted safety protocols, which require expenses for protective equipment and staff training. We don't see these protocols going away anytime soon. The pandemic has been isolating for the aging population we serve, and we still provide phone companionship for those who are not quite ready to have visitors in their homes. We also need to focus on our fundraising efforts because we had to cancel our in-person garden party for the past two years. This adaptive leadership group is helping us step back and take a wide look at all of these challenges.

BTCF is funding this cohort with Connecticut Community Foundation, Foundation for Community Health and Northwest Connecticut Community Foundation. ■

"It's risky to think outside the box. This program allows us to identify challenges and take a practical approach."

—Jane MacLaren,
Chore Service
Executive Director

(Continued from cover)

A grant from this program in 2021 helped Roxanne launch a series of virtual public discussions grounded in assigned readings and videos. People who “came up here for a better life” during the pandemic, as she put it, joined full-time residents to explore the experiences of BIPOC and other marginalized communities, and all came away transformed.

“The grant blew up,” Roxanne said. “It is way more than what we started out to do.”

One participant was inspired to donate money to increase local access to healthier foods. For her part, Roxanne focused on forming a social justice group for youth of all backgrounds to begin building trust across differences. “It’s one thing to have a conversation,” she said. “It takes it to the next level when you learn to interact.”

Thanks to a partnership with AmeriCorps and a second BTCF grant, a vacant storefront that served as the site of a mutual aid project during the height of the pandemic will soon welcome Roxanne’s youth group. Meanwhile, a three-month workshop on the culture and impact of hip-hop, made possible through an additional Bridging Divides, Healing Communities grant, began earlier this year.

Leading those sessions is Loki, a multi-talented clothing designer and barber. He says hip-hop can “bring people together to connect about what we have in common.” The sessions have attracted young adults and kids, Black and white, to explore nine elements that help define hip-hop culture. “From dancing and emceeing to entrepreneurship and fashion, these are things that any culture can relate to,” Loki said.

It is also a way to provide others what was missing during his own youth. “Coming up, one of the things I felt was always hard to find was support, someone who actually saw value in my creativity and in my potential,” Loki said.

Such generosity fuels their community building efforts in a town where they say hopelessness too often prevails and food and transportation access are limited. It also inspires their shared vision of sustained support and permanent space for programming that promotes healing and recovery, and provides job skills and training—a place where Roxanne hopes children can play and grow “in an atmosphere that is upwardly mobile and blended.”

This future center even has a name: the Ubuntu Project, from the South African idea that sense of self is shaped by relationships with other people. “This is the thing I believe in strongly enough to put my energy to,” Roxanne said. “This concept can teach people about what love actually is, and what it can actually do.” ■

ON THE COVER: Roxanne Wilkins, left, and her son Loki Anthony both received grants from BTCF’s Bridging Divides, Healing Communities initiative.

SPEAKER SERIES CONTINUES ON MAY 10

Our Bridging Divides, Healing Communities Speaker Series continues May 10 at Shakespeare & Company with New Yorker writer and National Book Award winner Evan Osnos. In his most recent book, he returns to three places he has lived to report on ordinary Americans in a time of pandemic, political turmoil and the pursuit of racial justice. Learn about the event, our grantmaking and more at BerkshireTaconic.org/Bridging.



Yonah Sadeh of Falls Village, Conn., won the Bridging Divides, Healing Communities Youth Film Challenge.



Stonewood Community Project in Millbrook, N.Y., is using its grant to expand outreach for a community garden and pantry.



Clinton Church Restoration Board Member Dr. Frances Jones-Sneed discussed how art can advance racial justice during our speaker series.



Speaker series panelist Dr. Robert D. Putnam shared stories from the Gilded Age to today to inspire thinking about the future.

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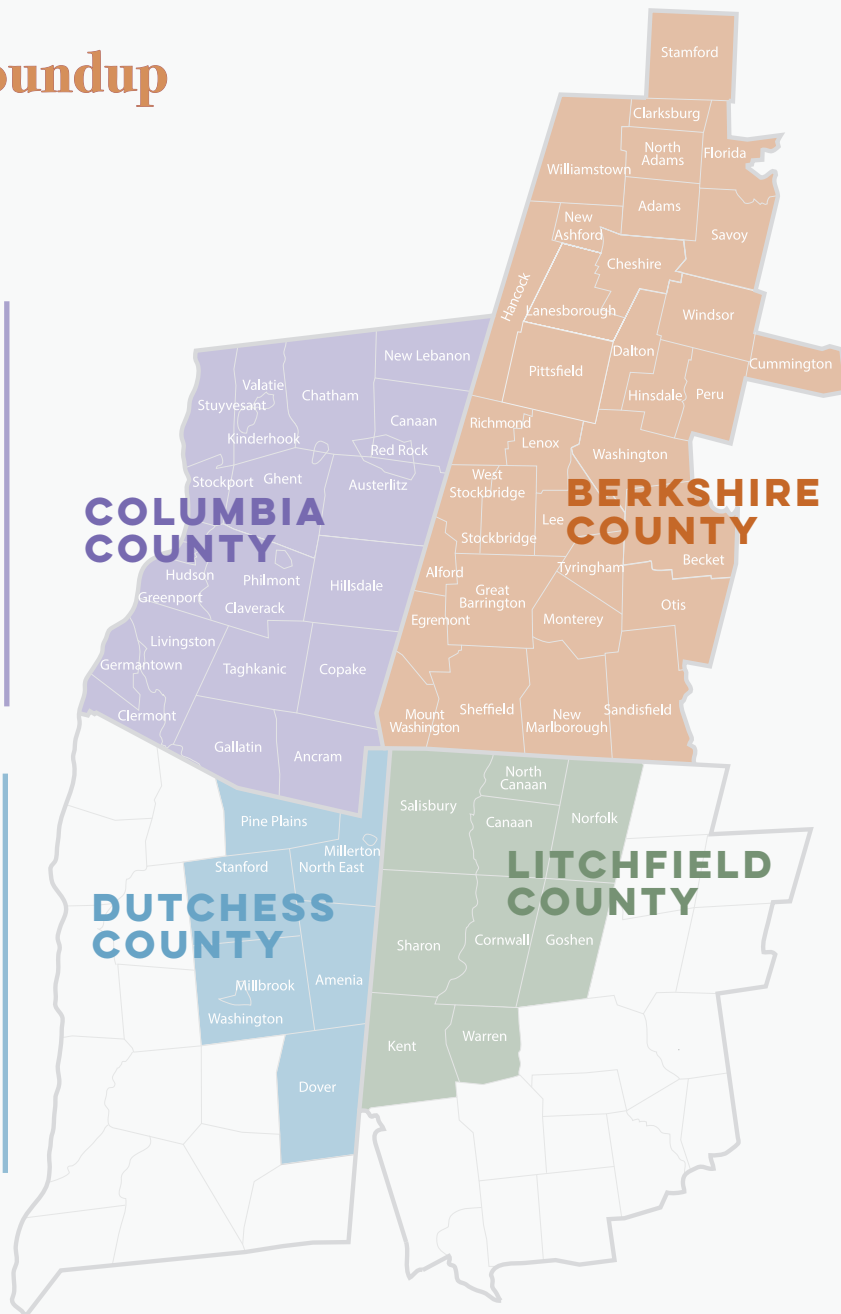
Regional Roundup

EforAll Berkshire County has extended to Columbia County, where four residents have joined an intensive program to turn their promising entrepreneurial ideas into successful businesses.

The Columbia Paper and BTCF launched the Columbia Paper Journalism Fund so donors can support local reporting that contributes to the civic, cultural and economic vibrancy of Columbia County.

Elizabeth M. Hewitt has joined our board. She is chief investment officer and senior vice president at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and lives part-time in Millbrook, N.Y.

The Webutuck Quest for Excellence Fund provided funding for five enriching school district projects that will focus on art, nature, music and work-based learning in a new school store.



A group of friends opened the Billy Evans Memorial Scholarship Fund to honor a Capitol police officer who died in the line of duty. They are fundraising to support graduating seniors of Drury High School.

Cynthia Dewi Oka of New Jersey is the 30th recipient of the Amy Clampitt residency. She is focused on her poetry during a nearly one-year stay at Clampitt's former home near Lenox.

BTCF's Northwest Corner Fund, in partnership with Northwest Connecticut Community Foundation, awarded grants to nonprofits for projects ranging from food pantry support to an internship program to make Housatonic River access more equitable.

The Litchfield County Center for Housing Opportunity has launched to address housing affordability in the Northwest Corner. It is a partnership among multiple nonprofits, with funding from BTCF and the Foundation for Community Health.