

BT^{CF}

NEWS

Together we can make
life here even better.

Fall 2024



**Equity Fund Celebration
2024 Scholarships
Youth in Democracy
Portraits of Generosity:
Jeff Leppo & Marjorie Safran**

**Berkshire
Taconic
Community
Foundation**

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Message from Leadership



As I step into this new role at Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation, I am both honored and energized by the work we are doing together.

Through the growth of the Equity Fund, we are putting power directly into the hands of communities of color. This fund is not just about grants; it represents a fundamental shift in how we approach philanthropy—trusting and empowering those who have been excluded from decision-making in the past. With your support, we are creating lasting change and setting a new standard for community-led transformation.

At the same time, our Youth in Democracy program is giving the next generation tools to shape their own communities, while our scholarships are opening doors for over 250 students to pursue their dreams. These efforts reflect the heart of our work: breaking down barriers and supporting the journeys of people at every stage of life.

And we are fortunate to have a community of donors, like Jeff Leppo and Marjorie Safran, whose story reminds us that philanthropy can be a force for change. Thank you for your continued belief and partnership in this work.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kara Mikulich".

Kara Mikulich, *Interim President*

On the cover: Equity Fund Leadership Advisory Committee members Tanya Jackson, Gwendolyn VanSant, Elena Mosely, and Monti Lawson.

COMMUNITY FUND

Youth in Democracy

In a timely response to the electoral climate, students Asharia, Myah, and Alan organized a voter registration drive at 18 Degrees in Pittsfield, Mass. Partnering with nonpartisan CareVote, they're educating their community on local voting procedures while gaining a valuable introduction to the democratic process. After the November elections, they will attend Pittsfield city council meetings to propose more democracy-focused projects.

Youth in Democracy is a Fellowship program funded by the Community Fund, providing a platform for young adults to create projects to create positive change at the local level. berkshiretaconic.org/yid
Photo by Marina Dominguez.





REGIONAL

Empowering Futures

2024 Scholarship Winners

This year, BDCF awarded over \$897,000 in scholarships to over 250 students, each of whom is preparing to begin the next chapter of their education. Each student's scholarship application told a story—stories of beauty and sadness, as well as stories of adventure, family, friendship, and courage and resilience in the face of challenges.

Some students described remarkable experiences and accomplishments, like performing with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, winning a national decathlon, or learning how to fly an airplane. Some shared moments of courage, such as standing up to racism or educating their community about different religions and cultures, while others included stories of hardship and overcoming obstacles after immigrating to the United States or fleeing the war in Ukraine.

These scholarships reduce financial barriers, affirm the incredible individual journeys of each student, and show that their community supports and believes in their aspirations. ■

Applications for 2025 scholarships open January 1st! berkshirataconic.org/scholarships



Visit our website to read our 2024 Scholarship Yearbook, which includes a list of our scholarships and each recipient, plus student spotlights.

berkshirataconic.org/2024yearbook

Scholarships by the Numbers

\$897,586

Total dollars awarded

573

Applicants

273

Scholarships awarded

29%

First generation to attend college



REGIONAL

From Vision to Reality

Grantees from Blackshires, Who We Be!, African American Archives of Columbia County, and Rock Steady Farm and Flowers. Photo by Kristen Blush

The Inaugural Celebration of the Equity Fund

In September, we celebrated the inaugural grantees of the Equity Fund—a bold, visionary effort to center BIPOC leadership and enact a community-driven, trust-based approach to philanthropy. The gathering, held at St. James Place in Great Barrington, brought together grantees, community leaders, donors, and allies to reflect on a transformative journey that is only just beginning.

Alícia Bacon, BDCF's internal lead for the Equity Fund, opened the event with words that encapsulated the spirit of the initiative: "We gather here today in the spirit of Ubuntu: I am because we are. This philosophy is at the heart of everything we do, reminding us that our collective work is what drives this initiative forward." Her remarks set the tone for an afternoon of reflection and vision. BDCF Board Chair Pam Green and Ny Whitaker, Executive Director of The Du Bois Freedom Center and co-host of the event, delivered opening remarks, followed by a keynote from Gwendolyn VanSant, the founder of Multicultural BRIDGE and the chief architect of the Equity Fund.

VanSant, a long-time advocate for racial justice, invoked the words of Edgar Villanueva from his seminal work "Decolonizing Wealth": "When we reclaim our shared resources, when we recover our places at the table and the drawing board, we can design our own healing." She continued, "I see this equity initiative as a platform for communities of color to heal, to lead, and to thrive."

The Equity Fund's origins date back to 2021, when BDCF joined BRIDGE's Inclusive Leadership Cohort for Social Change. At the time, BDCF was at the beginning of its internal transformation to integrate principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Through the guidance of BRIDGE and collaboration with 30 other organizations, BDCF began to reexamine its philanthropic practices to better serve the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities in our region.

Central to this shift has been the work of VanSant and BRIDGE, who directed the creation of the Equity Fund by engaging leaders of color across the region in focus groups, steering committees, and community forums. This grassroots approach evolved into a comprehensive initiative designed to advance racial justice with clear, actionable goals to engage BIPOC leaders, develop sustainable funding for racial equity, and ensure that those most affected by systemic inequities are the ones leading the solutions. Since its inception, over \$500,000 has been raised for the Equity Fund, establishing a new model for community-centered philanthropy. In 2023, VanSant became a member of the BDCF Board of Directors, helping the Foundation sustain its commitment to equity.

At the core of this initiative is the principle "Nothing about us without us," empowering BIPOC-led organizations and amplifying voices from historically

marginalized communities, including the region's growing immigrant populations.

The Equity Fund itself, seeded with the largest discretionary Board gift in BDCF's history, provides essential resources to support both emerging and established BIPOC leaders. Yet, it is only one facet of a broader, three-pronged approach that also includes a Leadership Advisory Committee, composed of BIPOC leaders who shape the grantmaking process, and a Learning and Giving Circle, which engages donors in deepening their understanding of systemic racism while transforming their approach to philanthropy.

The Equity Fund's first cohort of grantees exemplifies the breadth and depth of leadership within BIPOC communities:

Blackshires Empowerment Foundation: A phased community development project designed to create a resident-led corporation that empowers community collaboration and leadership for revitalization efforts.

Who We Be! (Tanya Jackson), Juneteenth: The 5th anniversary of Hudson's Juneteenth holiday showcasing Black life and history, offering compensation to community members, and engaging leaders, artists, and entrepreneurs.

Choices Mentoring Initiative: A program broadening horizons through social-emotional learning and alternative experiences like college visits and community outings, aimed at fostering curiosity and empowerment.

African American Archive of Columbia County, Van Burgen Overmantel: A historical reenactment at the Van Alen House to raise awareness about ethnic diversity in the Hudson Valley, with interpreters bringing characters from a 1730 painting to life.

Rock Steady Farm and Flowers, Fall Gathering for QTBIPOC Food & Farm Community: A community event uniting QTBIPOC farmers and food entrepreneurs for celebration, collaboration, and justice-focused efforts through vendor showcases and a special community workday.

Brianna Christie, National Communication Association Panelist: Support to present a

paper at the NCA convention on the "communal gaze," analyzing cultural standards within minority communities and addressing sexual violence against Black women.

Greater Hudson Promise Neighborhood, Back-to-School Support to Mitigate Chronic Absenteeism: Reducing chronic absenteeism in the Hudson City School District by providing financial support for back-to-school shopping and family services.

The celebration marked not just a culmination, but a pivotal beginning. The Equity Initiative is poised to expand, incorporating more voices, leaders, and resources to further the cause of racial justice. In closing, Van Sant captured the essence of the moment: "This is about healing. This is about reclaiming our shared resources and ensuring that communities of color have the power to lead their own futures. Together, we will be able to build an enduring legacy." ■

Get involved! berkshiretaconic.org/join-equity



Top: Stephanie Steed, Kara Mikulich, Merle Kailas; Middle: Pam Green, Jeffrey Alan Peck, Ny Whitaker, Alycia Bacon; Bottom: Peter Frank, Aileen Meehan, Noah Eckstein, Diana Cruz. Photos by Kristen Blush.

Marjorie Safran and Jeff Leppo of Pittsfield, Mass., at the Equity Fund Celebration.

PORTRAITS OF GENEROSITY

“We have to keep getting better.”



A Commitment to Equity and Innovation in Philanthropy

Jeff Leppo and Marjorie Safran, both retired doctors, have spent their careers improving the lives of others through medicine. Today, their passion for service continues, but through philanthropy. Their journey from New York City, where both of them grew up in a Jewish philanthropic tradition, to the Berkshires has shaped their belief that giving back is a powerful force for change.

Their commitment to philanthropy took on new urgency in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd. Influenced by their daughter’s call to action, they asked themselves, “What can we do that would make a difference?” This reflection led them to focus on racial equity. “We realized that the barriers to opportunity faced by BIPOC communities were immense, particularly in education,” Leppo explains. “The same old, same old doesn’t work. We need to innovate, take risks, and evolve, just like in science and medicine.”

Leppo’s medical background heavily influences his approach to philanthropy. As a cardiologist, he was trained to experiment, adjust, and keep

trying until the right solution emerged. He believes philanthropy should be approached with the same mindset: “You’re not going to move the needle by doing more of the same. Safe and comfortable practices are the death knell for science—and for philanthropy, too.”

In 2022, Leppo and Safran established the Berkshire Inspired Educational Scholarship Fund through Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation (BTCF), which supports BIPOC and economically disadvantaged students from Berkshire County who face emergency financial needs while pursuing higher education. The creation of this fund was inspired by the story of W.E.B. Du Bois, who attended both Fisk and Harvard with financial support from his local church congregation in Great Barrington in the late 19th century.

Safran and Leppo’s vision for philanthropy is not limited to merely providing funds; they believe in involving the communities that will be most impacted by the work. “It’s important to get the people involved who you’re trying to help,” they insist. This approach ensures that their funds

are being directed in ways that will be most meaningful. To that end, they helped establish an advisory committee to guide the Berkshire Inspired Educational Scholarship Fund, ensuring that BIPOC voices are part of the decision-making process.

Their scholarship fund is part of a broader effort to change how philanthropy is practiced in the Berkshires. Leppo and Safran joined BDCF's Learning and Giving Circle, part of a regional Equity Initiative, which brings together donors to learn about racial equity and how to give more effectively. "We see philanthropy as a force for change, and we're trying to steer in that direction," Leppo says. "BDCF is embodying that notion and inspiring more donors to do the same."

The couple's involvement with BDCF came about at a pivotal time. As they approached retirement, they were also redoing their estate plans and thinking about how they wanted to leave a legacy. A group of friends introduced them to BDCF, and after some initial discussions, they realized that the foundation could help them achieve their philanthropic goals. "BDCF made it easy to give to the causes we're passionate about. We had meetings with the team there, and they helped us structure our fund in a way that would make the most impact."

In addition to their scholarship fund, Leppo and Safran have supported other local initiatives, such as the Westside Legends, a Pittsfield-based group working to revitalize historically Black neighborhoods. Through their support of this project and others like it, they hope to contribute to a more equitable future.

Leppo is quick to acknowledge the privilege that he and Safran have had throughout their lives. "We both got through college and medical school with no debt, which was a huge advantage," he reflects. "I had a better head start than many of my peers. In addition, "there was only one person of color in my medical school class." This realization fuels their dedication to supporting students who face far greater financial and social challenges than they ever did.

Through their work with BDCF, they are helping to steer philanthropy toward greater innovation and inspiring others to think critically about how they can make a meaningful difference. "We have to keep getting better," Leppo concludes, "because the work is far from done." ■

Simplify Your Year-end Giving with BDCF

Every year, hundreds of donors reach their philanthropic goals when they partner with us. We direct thousands of grants that help local nonprofits achieve their missions and students pursue their dreams.

OPEN A FUND

Support a variety of causes with ease when you open a BDCF Donor Advised Fund. After you open your fund, we handle all administrative and investment details.

GIVE TO THE COMMUNITY FUND

A donation to our Community Fund is another easy way you can support local causes. The Community Fund helps respond to pressing needs and build thriving communities for all.

Visit berkshiretaconic.org/simplify



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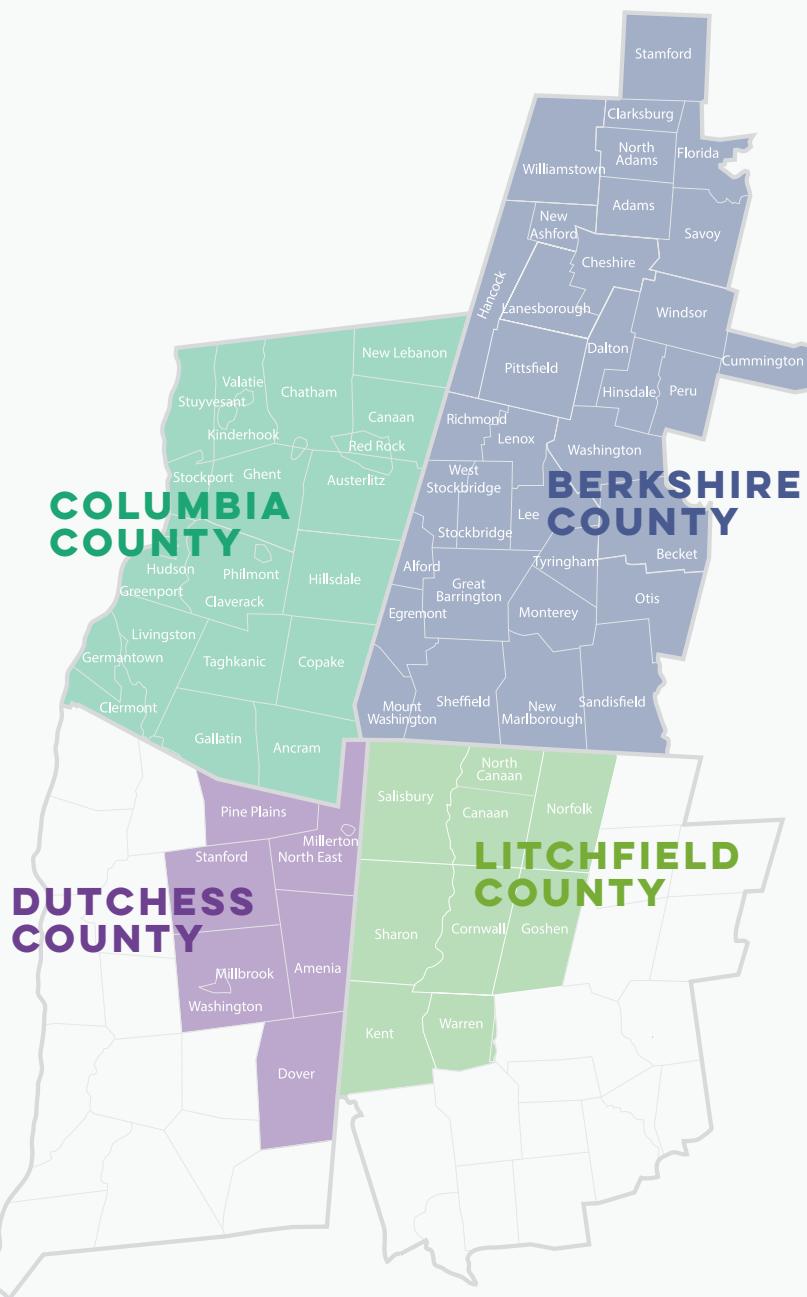
Regional Roundup

A grant from the **Fund for Columbia County** to the Claverack Free Library will help pay for a generator, enabling the library to become a community relief center (heating and cooling) during power outages.

The **Early Literacy in Columbia County Fund** continues to support Greater Hudson Promise Neighborhood's Early Literacy and Learning daily programs, with the addition of traveling programs that visit Head Start classes, child care centers, and libraries.

Youth in Democracy
fellows Angel Camargo
and Zaina Aboueid
organized a Fall Festival in
October at Eddie Collins
Memorial Park
in Millerton, partnering
with NorthEast
Community Center.

NED Corps welcomed an additional bilingual case worker to bolster immigrant services throughout northeast Dutchess County.



The Berkshire Black Economic Council hosted Noir Roots, a free street festival in Pittsfield in October with support from our **Arts Build Community** initiative.

The **South Berkshire County Fund** supported the TriTown Connector transit program, which provides transportation 7 days a week within the towns of Egremont, Great Barrington, Monterey, Stockbridge, West Stockbridge, and Sheffield.

The Fund for the Northwest Corner provided three nonprofits with flexible funding to develop and strengthen their programs: David M. Hunt Library, Housatonic Youth Service Bureau, and Sharon Playhouse.

Sharon Hospital's
Career Readiness
Initiative received a grant
to provide high school
students hands-on learning
opportunities in a variety
of health care professions.