



# Opportunities for Foundation Leadership: Meeting Community Information Needs

**Stories of Knight Foundation  
Community Information Challenge Grantees**

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*Informed and engaged communities.*



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## Introduction

# Case Studies in Community Leadership

The development and rapid spread of the Internet and the decline of traditional sources of community news and reporting have opened up a unique leadership opportunity for community and place-based foundations. The Knight Community Information Challenge (KCIC) was established to inspire those foundations to take up this opportunity by finding ways to serve information needs in their community. The challenge has two explicit goals: creating more informed and engaged communities; and increasing community and place-based foundations' involvement in helping address community information needs.

Now three years into the initiative, Knight Foundation and its evaluation partner FSG have begun to see its impact in a number of areas. In particular, we have learned how community and place-based foundations have strengthened their leadership through addressing community information needs. In the process of supporting information and media projects, foundations have ventured beyond fundraising and grantmaking to engage in catalytic activities in their communities. We have seen a number of examples where foundations have forged a unique leadership role by:

1. Developing new insights into existing program areas
2. Facilitating new partnerships with community organizations and institutions
3. Enhancing their role in community conversations and public dialogue
4. Generating new collaborations and programs
5. Amplifying their visibility and local or national prominence

To help other community and place-based foundations understand how this is being done, we offer three case studies that show how community foundations worked to create more informed and engaged communities and, in the process, contributed to transforming their own institutions. The case studies are of three foundations at different stages of development, possessing different levels of assets and with different missions: **Park City Foundation**, **Central Carolina Community Foundation** and **Chicago Community Trust**. The one thread that ties them together is their effort to advance their goals and increase their leadership role in the community through supporting community information needs.

## PROFILED LEADERS AT A GLANCE

Foundation	The Park City Foundation	Central Carolina Community Foundation	The Chicago Community Trust
Asset size (2009)	\$1M	\$75M	\$1.5M
Knight Community Information Challenge Project	ParkCityGreen.org	Bridging Generations through Technology, Information, Media and Engagement (BGTIME)	Community News Matters

### > Watch their Stories Online

Hear more about the foundations' experience from the leaders themselves. Go to [www.informationneeds.org/leadership](http://www.informationneeds.org/leadership) to see videos of the profiled foundations.

As we explore the stories of these three foundations, we observe how an ability to connect and convene partners has been central to the success of their KCIC projects. These foundations, with their large and diverse networks, are brokering relationships that would not otherwise exist, or organically emerge, within their communities. With each new relationship started and connection made, these foundations are reaching more community members. And, as these foundations expand their networks and become more visible, so do the community issues they work to address.



### **The Park City Foundation's Story**

In the case of Park City, a nascent community foundation took on the cause of climate change and leveraged this issue to raise awareness and spark higher levels of civic engagement among residents of this small ski resort town. The foundation enhanced its role in community conversations by engaging local leaders and the wider community of residents, to both understand the issues and inspire them to act to address them. It generated new collaborations and programs by developing relationships with powerful local leaders, such as the mainstream news publisher in town. And it amplified its local prominence by tackling an important challenge and making the project a visible city-wide success.

### **Central Carolina Community Foundation's Story**

In the case of the Central Carolina Community Foundation (CCCF), a more established foundation catalyzed change by pairing up seniors and students to learn about the possibilities of the internet and new media technologies. CCCF enhanced its role in hosting community conversations by engaging participants in its information needs initiative and a series of prominent mayoral debates. The foundation generated new programs and a set of new collaborations with local and national organizations that would not have otherwise emerged without its KCIC efforts.

### **The Chicago Community Trust's Story**

In Chicago, an enduring and long-respected institution increased its effectiveness within the city's information news ecosystem by focusing on the field of innovative hyper-local news efforts. The Chicago Community Trust started out by developing new insights through commissioning research on Chicago's news and information landscape. It then facilitated new partnerships among and between grassroots community news media project leaders by launching a grant program for new media innovators in the greater Chicago area. The Trust also amplified its visibility through its leadership in building a local funder collaborative focused on addressing community information needs.

While each of these three stories is unique, they collectively embody lessons that other foundation leaders can apply to efforts in their own regions.



## The Park City Foundation:

# How a New Foundation Made its Mark

### I. Getting Involved: A New Community Foundation Finds a Cause

The Park City Foundation (PCF) is a new community foundation created in 2007. Park City, Utah, is a small ski resort town with a close-knit community of residents who care deeply about preserving both the beauty of their natural surroundings and the town's profitable snow-based tourist attractions. From the very beginning, PCF leaders knew they wanted to do more than simply steward local donors' funds—they wanted the foundation to tackle important, pressing needs. Since the potential effects of climate change are significant in a community so economically dependent on snowfall, environmental preservation seemed like a promising area in which to invest the foundation's time and resources.

PCF was just getting started when Knight Foundation announced its first KCIC grant competition in 2008. The foundation's Executive Director Trisha Worthington explains that she didn't think PCF had much of a shot at winning, but took a chance anyway.

“We decided that since we were so new, we would go for it—not thinking that we would ever be considered. But we figured we would learn something from the process and get out in the community.”

### Learning about Community Information Needs

PCF used the KCIC application process to jump-start its strategy. Worthington and her colleagues requested meetings with leaders from the local media and city government to deepen their understanding of existing information needs in the community. These meetings led to a partnership with the city to inform residents about ways they could take action to fight climate change, which, in turn, evolved into the high-impact project that PCF undertook when it later won a KCIC grant. With the grant funds, PCF developed a new climate-focused web site, [ParkCityGreen.org](http://ParkCityGreen.org), in partnership with Park City Municipal (the Mayor's office), and mounted a concurrent public event in partnership with Park City Mountain Resort, Save Our Snow II, to raise awareness and inspire action around climate issues.



## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### **ParkCityGreen.org: A Hyper-Local Portal for Environmental Action**

ParkCityGreen.org was a new online forum designed to help local residents learn about ways they could personally participate in and contribute to environmental preservation. While numerous websites already provided users with generic tools to calculate their carbon footprint or practice energy saving ideas, ParkCityGreen.org is unique because it is wholly Park City-centric. For instance, visitors to the site can calculate their carbon footprint based on data about their actual local energy providers, whereas other sites only extrapolate the information based on national averages. The site also provides residents with information on federal, state and local rebates, and tax incentives to reduce users' carbon footprint. The specificity of the suggestions and information to the Park City context make the information compelling and actionable.

### **Save Our Snow II: Raising Public Awareness and Commitment to the Cause**

At the same time as PCF was developing ParkCityGreen.org with the Mayor's office, the foundation was working with Park City Mountain Resort to mount a highly-visible city-wide event, Save Our Snow II. The event was designed to inspire residents to take action to prevent climate change and learn about its potential impact on Park City's economy. Save Our Snow II built on momentum generated by the first Save Our Snow event, organized two and a half years before. The first event had been organized by the local public radio station, KPCW, in partnership with Park City Mountain Resort, and led to an increased understanding among community members of the science and impact of climate change.

Save Our Snow II went beyond the original event by including segments that vividly illustrated the economic impacts of climate change on Park City, such as calculating the economic impact of losing just one ski day. The timing of Save Our Snow II was coordinated with the launch of ParkCityGreen.org in order to establish a direct connection between raising awareness and concern about climate change and empowering residents to act on the problem.



## II. Beyond The Project: Foundation Leadership

As a brand new community foundation, PCF was looking for ways to help address important issues facing Park City, while also establishing itself as an important community resource that had credibility with and visibility among other local institutions and leaders. Through Save Our Snow II and ParkCityGreen.org, PCF successfully galvanized prominent local political, business and nonprofit leaders around the cause of environmental preservation and parlayed their involvement into community-wide projects that engaged thousands of local residents in the issue. Its success with these programs allowed PCF, in only its third year of operation, to broaden its scope of impact to include conducting research and disseminating information on a broad range of vital local issues including health, education, and the economy as well as the environment. PCF's information and media initiative opened up partnership opportunities with other local institutions and established the foundation as an active presence in the community. Let's examine more closely the ways in which PCF enhanced its leadership in the community and empowered its residents to address the environmental and economic threat of climate change.

### *1. Enhancing the foundation's Role in Community Conversations*

Serving as the convener of Save Our Snow II helped PCF advance its cause of combating climate change and build its standing in the community. One important facet of the event's success was the foundation's ability to unite different segments of the community around one cause. PCF hosted numerous committee meetings which included media, business and nonprofit leaders in preparation for Save Our Snow II. In those meetings, PCF leaders intentionally crafted very specific messages and used language designed to integrate different segments of the community. In so doing, they successfully made the cause directly relevant for each stakeholder.

**“With the Knight grant, the foundation had the opportunity to be a leader on a huge issue for this community. There is a lot more educating to do, but the Knight opportunity jump started it.” – Local government official**

PCF staff also engaged local media and business leaders, including Park City Mountain Resort, which helped enhance the visibility of the event through its connections to the local media. The Park Record, the local paper and an important partner of the community foundation in raising awareness of ParkCityGreen.org, printed and distributed Save Our Snow inserts in the paper. Even before the event occurred or the website had launched, the preparation for Save Our Snow II attracted a lot of attention.

## **2. Amplifying the Foundation's Visibility and Local Prominence**

Convening the community for Save Our Snow II increased awareness of PCF's existence and changed the community's perception of its role in Park City. As is typical for newly-established community foundations, many local residents didn't understand what PCF would do beyond attracting gifts and making grants. Various local nonprofit leaders were also anxious about the prospect of PCF becoming another competitor for the limited philanthropic resources in the community. Some residents were even uncertain whether PCF was distinct from the existing Park City Education Foundation, founded in the mid-1980s.

**“Before Save Our Snow II, the community saw the foundation as a one-stop shop for donations as opposed to a community resource.” – Local government official**

Save Our Snow II and ParkCityGreen.org demonstrated PCF's relevance and established its position as a local leader with the relationships and skills required to successfully unite the community. These initiatives provided PCF with the platform to make clear that it was not created to compete for philanthropic dollars but rather to raise awareness of community-wide needs and ultimately attract more philanthropic support to address those needs. PCF showed that it would not simply grab a slice of the local philanthropic pie, but could increase the pie for the benefit of all local institutions.

## **3. Generating New Collaborations and Programs**

Organizing Save Our Snow II with Park City Mountain Resort and collaborating with the city to develop ParkCityGreen.org has generated additional partnership opportunities for the foundation. These subsequent collaborations have contributed to greater progress on environmental preservation, and have allowed PCF to further define its leadership role by addressing more general community information needs.

### **Working with Mainstream Media**

In the wake of PCF's initial efforts, Park City community leaders adopted new ways to maintain momentum around climate change. Diane Foster, Park City Environmental Sustainability Manager and manager of ParkCityGreen.org, and leaders from the local public radio station joined forces to create a weekly radio program, *My Sustainable Year*.



The program, which includes PSAs that air three times per week on the radio, twice weekly Facebook updates, and monthly articles in *The Park Record* newspaper, provides residents with practical tips for reducing their carbon footprint that are appropriate to the season. The *My Sustainable Year* series has received positive feedback from residents, including the head of the local land conservancy, who had never ridden the bus in Park City before *My Sustainable Year*'s "Bus Adventure Week." In addition to attracting attention itself, the *My Sustainable Year* series directs listeners and readers to [ParkCityGreen.org](http://ParkCityGreen.org), encouraging continued awareness raising and use of the website, and further building the reach and visibility of the foundation as a sponsor of the site.

*"My Sustainable Year is designed to let people try out a new behavior for a week and also to drive traffic to the [ParkCityGreen.org](http://ParkCityGreen.org) website, which is significant given KPCW's 70 percent listener share."* – **Park City Municipal staff**

PCF has also developed a stronger relationship the local newspaper, *The Park Record*. The publisher of the local paper was particularly impressed with the foundation's convening ability. He had taken note of how PCF successfully brought together segments of the community that did not typically collaborate, including city administrators, families with school children, local ski resorts, the radio station and nonprofits. PCF leveraged that positive impression into another successful collaboration.

At a convening of Knight Foundation grantees, PCF staff member Katie Wright spoke with the Boulder Community Foundation about a Boulder community indicators report that highlights and categorizes a variety of statistics related to quality of life in Boulder. Inspired by this concept, Wright set out to develop a similar report for Park City and Summit County. Though the region has a thriving nonprofit community – Park City has over 80 nonprofit organizations in a town of 8,000 residents and region of 22,000 – no resource existed that summarized their work and parsed out the needs that they seek to address. Though tourist brochures and real estate publications abounded, there was no comprehensive, objective annual report of this type for Park City and Summit County.

*"The foundation had the ability to bring so many elements of the community together to create a publication that would be a valued product. I probably wouldn't have done it had they not had the kind of perspective that they did from Save Our Snow."*

– **Publisher, *The Park Record***

## Taking on More Community Information Needs

Wright returned to Park City fired up to launch a publication similar to Boulder's. Because of the trust and respect that PCF had established with *The Park Record* through Save Our Snow II, the publisher received Wright's proposal warmly. He also had a longstanding interest in publishing an almanac for the community. While the publisher was open to PCF's proposal, he also saw the concept and partnership as a potential risk. In particular, he was unsure whether the project would generate a profit through advertising revenue and lacked confidence in PCF's ability to sell advertisers on the idea. At the same time, he believed that the foundation had the right knowledge and relationships to conceptualize and assemble a publication that would fill an information gap in the community. Trusting that PCF would make it work, he decided to take the risk. The partnership culminated in the creation of *Milepost 2010*, a report published by *The Park Record* that includes statistics on statewide, city and county demographics as well as information on education, health, economy and tourism.

“What a wealth of information. As someone who has lived in Park City for many years, I found it enlightening to track the growth and changes in the various facets of our community in *Milepost 2010*.” – Park City resident

*Milepost 2010* has been a significant project for PCF. It has allowed the foundation to assume a broader role in the community. The publication fills an important void in the community's information ecosystem, and the community's response has been so overwhelmingly positive that *The Park Record* plans to publish the report annually. In future years the foundation plans to use *Milepost 2010* as a starting point to provide a more in-depth understanding of Park City's assets and challenges.

## III. Lessons in Leadership

As a young and growing foundation, PCF has leveraged the Knight Community Information Challenge grant to quickly establish itself as a vital leader in its local community. By partnering with the city government to develop ParkCityGreen.org, and by organizing the Save Our Snow II with Park City Mountain Resort, PCF has developed a large network of influential partners and organized the broader community to take action on climate change. As the foundation bolstered its community presence and leadership, it has proved itself as a capable convener of diverse stakeholders. In four short years, it has gone from a new and little-known player to a visible and well-respected community institution, well-positioned to address a broad range of community needs.



# Central Carolina Community Foundation: How An Established Foundation Got Its Groove

## I. Getting Involved: Information and Media

When JoAnn Turnquist arrived for her first day on the job in February 2009 as CEO of the Central Carolina Community Foundation (CCCF) in Columbia, South Carolina, she faced a tall order: the foundation's board had recently completed an intensive nine-month strategic planning process, and the cornerstone of the plan was to increase assets to \$150 million by 2030 while transforming the foundation into a more *visible and viable* institution in the region, among other goals. Now it was up to Turnquist to turn that vision into reality.

A few months earlier, a group of South Carolina's top media and academic leaders had informally begun meeting to discuss ways to address the region's growing news and information gap, in particular how to best meet the information needs of the city's most under-served populations. One prominent group member was Charles Bierbauer, an award-winning former CNN reporter and senior White House correspondent and Dean of the College of Mass Communications and Information Studies at the University of South Carolina (USC). USC's Newsplex, a media learning laboratory established in 2001 with support from Knight Foundation, was also at the table; Newsplex helps news organizations adapt to new technologies, provides training and sponsors academic research, among other activities. Spurred by the announcement in September 2008 of the Knight Foundation Community Information Challenge (KCIC), the group soon expanded to include executives from the city's major print news outlet and the state's public broadcasting television station, as well as leaders from Benedict College (a local historically black college) and local foundation leaders.

Knowing the central role of community foundations in the KCIC, Bierbauer and his colleagues invited the foundation to join in their discussions, and Dr. Susie VanHuss, the foundation's interim president, immediately agreed. From her experience with the foundation's engagement in the City of Columbia's homeless shelter debate, she had honed her instincts for identifying and capitalizing on promising opportunities, and this one had all the signs of success: Respected and talented partners with experience and traction on the issue, and perfect timing as the foundation was looking to become more visible and viable.

And so with the announcement of Knight's new competition, VanHuss, Bierbauer and his growing cadre of colleagues teamed up to develop the idea for a new media and information initiative, BGTIME (Bridging Generations through Technology, Information, Media and Engagement), with KCIC support. BGTIME turned out to be an innovative and exciting idea in the information and new media space. The program bridges technological and information divides by uniting formerly disparate groups, such as seniors and college students, while serving the information needs of vulnerable communities.



## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### **BGTIME: Facebookers and Seniors Mash Up**

BGTIME bridges ethnic, economic, and generational divides by increasing digital literacy among seniors in the greater Columbia area. College students are paired with seniors who, together, engage in both learning and teaching: students teach seniors how to use new technology and access information through the Internet, and the seniors contribute wisdom and experience that is captured and shared through new media avenues. The primary focus is not to simply train seniors to access information from the Internet, but to enable them to share information and perspectives in ways that are easy to communicate with other members of the community.

The concept was originated by members of the working group, which included educators and administrators at the University of South Carolina and, later, Benedict College as well as various media thought leaders. Members reflected on which parts of the Columbia regional community had been left behind in the digital age and most lacked access to news and vital information. They quickly agreed that the most vulnerable group was senior citizens, who spanned all income levels and cultural backgrounds, and, as a demographic, were both a big part of the community and relatively disengaged in using new media. BGTIME proved to be a critical first step in empowering students and seniors to use new media to access information, express themselves and tell their stories.

## II. Beyond the Project: Foundation Leadership

Turnquist's arrival at CCCF coincided with the foundation's receipt of the KCIC grant for BGTIME. As Turnquist took the helm at CCCF, she asked herself: What could the foundation do to further leverage its resources toward solving pressing problems in the community, and at the same time enhance the institution's visibility and sustainability? Participation in the creation and roll-out of BGTIME laid the groundwork for Turnquist to lead CCCF toward other opportunities where it could have a visible, high-impact role in the community. Let's take a closer look at how the foundation's involvement in its information and media project enhanced its leadership in the community and deepened its understanding of seniors' concerns, in particular as Columbia's mayoral election approached.

"I think people initially thought of CCCF as a foundation *in* the community. Its transformation has been into a foundation *for* the community."

– America Speaks Engagement Team member

### 1. *Enhancing the Foundation's Role in Community Conversations*

As BGTIME gained traction, the community foundation noted that participating seniors were increasingly embracing new technologies and the Internet to connect with friends and family and to capture and share their life experiences. The foundation was struck by this trend: though they had expected BGTIME to provide greater access to public information through the Internet, the seniors' motivations for using the new technology were typically much more personal. So CCCF began to seek out other ways to engage BGTIME participants in more public concerns.

The upcoming 2010 Columbia mayoral election provided CCCF with a unique opportunity. It was the first time in 20 years that Columbia's incumbent mayor was not running for re-election, and a broad field of eight candidates had emerged in a high-profile, hotly contested race. The community foundation seized on the opening, and offered to host public forums for seniors to encourage them to participate in civic dialogue around the election. The community foundation hosted two mayoral forums among the eight candidates for mayor, focusing on two issues with which it had become deeply familiar: senior concerns and homelessness.

## Creating Community Conversations

Soon the field of mayoral candidates had narrowed to two, and CCCF again stepped into a convening role and hosted a debate. Turnquist invited Charles Bierbauer to moderate. The quality and content of this debate – in which Bierbauer’s television experience and skillful moderation served to elevate the discourse and generate substantive discussion – was widely praised and created a new standard in the election process. “The [community foundation]-hosted debate raised the bar for the content and tone of all subsequent debates,” noted the now-Mayor’s Chief of Staff.

“The foundation-hosted debates were the most substantive of the debates. CCCF did a good job of bringing hundreds of people from disparate groups together to meet the community’s most pressing needs.” – **Public official**

## 2. Amplifying the Foundation’s Visibility and National Prominence

The mayoral forums and debates that grew out of BGTIME marked an important inflection point for the community foundation. Following the debates, CCCF was invited to present the BGTIME project at the 2010 Media Learning Seminar conference in Miami. Unbeknownst to CCCF CEO Turnquist, Carolyn Lukensmeyer, founder of the national nonprofit, America Speaks, was listening to her presentation. America Speaks promotes civic engagement and serves as a non-partisan convener of community forums and meetings on a host of public policy issues.

The community foundation’s BGTIME experience stood out to Lukensmeyer for its successful engagement of seniors and students, and its subsequent orchestration of the mayoral forums and debate. This was noteworthy for two reasons. Firstly, CCCF had generated political interest and civic participation among college students – a constituency that is notoriously difficult to engage in civic discourse. Secondly, the foundation had used technology to teach BGTIME seniors about the Internet and new media not just for personal use but to broaden the reach of its community engagement efforts, through its partnership with ETV (the state’s television public broadcasting network) to stream the CCCF-hosted mayoral debate online.

America Speaks was at the time preparing to roll out a nationwide civic discussion on the federal budget and deficit called “Our Budget, Our Economy.” The event would allow residents of towns and cities to learn about and participate in facilitated discussions on strategies for the country’s fiscal future, using technology to link participating sites and unite thousands of residents in a national town hall meeting. CCCF was clearly a natural partner to coordinate and host the national meeting’s forum in Columbia. America Speaks offered CCCF an opportunity to leverage the foundation’s experience with BGTIME and the mayoral debates to further advance their *visible and viable* strategic goal.





## Responding to Opportunity's Call

Initially, some board members were skeptical that the event would remain non-partisan, but the Board ultimately unanimously approved the debate. The Board charged Turnquist with the challenge to ensure that a diverse set of community members with a broad representation of backgrounds, political affiliations and perspectives participate in the national town hall discussion scheduled for June 26, 2010.

Participating in the America Speaks "Our Budget, Our Economy" event presented an important opportunity for Columbia, as it was one of 19 selected town meeting sites among cities that included Chicago, Philadelphia and Los Angeles. America Speaks received a significant amount of media attention throughout the community, and CCCF, as the event convener, became better known. As it turned out, Columbia had the largest engagement team of any participating city, and residents throughout the community heard of the discussion and the foundation's role through extensive participant recruitment efforts.

The America Speaks event has led to heightened community interest in bringing the same discussion format to policy issues at state and local levels. Turnquist believes that the opportunity to engage Columbia residents in local issues is ripe. For a community that is sometimes considered to be strongly rooted in the past, with deep racial and socio-economic divisions, the opportunity to bring residents together to discuss and engage with pressing local issues has been critically important. CCCF has continued to pursue its partnership with America Speaks, and will receive training to apply the America Speaks methodology at the local level on issues that pertain to the greater Columbia community.

**"America Speaks saw that we had the ability, knowledge, and contacts to bring people together. The mayoral forums taught us that we could get people in a room, which gave us some confidence to do America Speaks."**

**– CEO, Central Carolina Community Foundation**

## ***3. Generating New Collaborations and Programs***

CCCF is pursuing new partnerships and program opportunities that have sprung from the relationships they built through their BGTIME project.

The community foundation went on to partner with local library systems to host a literacy summit that brought together leaders from the 11 surrounding counties, including library directors and key literacy stakeholders from each county, to discuss and collaboratively plan for literacy improvements. The goal of 'Literacy 2030' is for South Carolina to become the most literate state in the country by 2030 by identifying



and addressing key literacy challenges in each county. The foundation is interested in the process for bringing these stakeholders together, but also in the ongoing collaborative planning and projects that will emerge from it.

As BGTIME evolves, CCCF has considered how it can engage area senior citizens in the community. One initiative that has been chosen due to its ability to help bridge generations is *One Book, One Columbia*, a community-wide reading initiative where people of all ages and all backgrounds read a common book and come together to share their impressions, learn more about the book and its subject matter, and to connect with their neighbors. 2011 will be the inaugural year for this annual initiative in Columbia. Seniors and students from the BGTIME project will participate in the project as reading advocates and discussion leaders. They will also use their recently honed new media skills to provide journalist coverage across the city, by recording discussions and blogging about the event on the BGTIME website. *One Book, One Columbia* is expected to give seniors the opportunity to become more engaged in their community, both offline and online.

“The community foundation did not have media exposure to this extent in the past. BGTIME was a breakthrough, and now we are getting that same kind of exposure for other projects we do” – **Board Member, Central Carolina Community Foundation**

### III. Lessons in Leadership

As Turnquist nears the end of her second year at the helm of the Central Carolina Community Foundation, she can point to a long list of accomplishments that mark the foundation’s progress toward becoming a more *visible and viable* institution. It has dramatically increased its profile in the community through BGTIME, just as it has also been able to increase information access and civic engagement among the local senior population through BGTIME forums and community programs. *The State* newspaper, a BGTIME partner and Columbia’s major daily, runs regular BGTIME ads below the weather report. The foundation has also developed relationships with major universities and has tapped into the city’s impressive wealth of expertise in an area new to the foundation. With this powerful group of partners, the foundation’s profile in the community has grown, and so has its understanding of the importance of the ability to access and share vital information. As a result, CCCF has become more widely known, more deeply respected and an undeniable go-to player on issues of concern to residents of Columbia and the Midlands region. It has enhanced its capacity and relationships to take a leadership role on important issues facing the region and to shift the dialogue and create impact.



## The Chicago Community Trust:

# How a Leading Foundation Broke New Ground

### I. Getting Involved: Chicago's Information and Media Landscape

Walk into Chicago Community Trust's offices on a typical day, and the first thing you are struck by is the commanding view of Chicago from the foundation's hushed conference room. This venerable philanthropic institution—founded nearly a century ago as one of nation's first community foundations—is comfortably housed on the 20th floor of a modernist-style skyscraper in downtown Chicago's desirable North Loop.

But if you'd happened to visit the Trust on August 21, 2009, you would have been struck by a less routine scene: on that day the Trust's conference room was overflowing past capacity and brimming with excitement as an eclectic group of journalists, community organization leaders, local bloggers, aspiring new-media entrepreneurs and nonprofit communicators gathered to learn about Community News Matters, a new grant opportunity for Chicago-area media innovators. The mix of visitors included leaders from Gapers Block, a for-profit website that encourages browsers to "slow down and check out your city" (the site takes its name from a local term for "rubbernecking" at a traffic accident), Community Media Workshop (a local nonprofit that provides communications coaching for other nonprofit organizations and sources grassroots and community news for journalists), and the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, among other organizations. As Trust staff explained the program, revealing that the application process would be open to all and highly transparent, the buzz in the room was palpable. The idea that any type of local information innovator could apply and be eligible to participate—for-profits, nonprofits, even individuals—was unprecedented.

### A New Approach to Information and Media

The Trust's approach was a game-changer for Chicago's news and information scene. Historically, Chicago's three biggest foundations – the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the McCormick Foundation and the Trust – had defined how grants were made in the city around news and media concerns. Their grants and in-kind support to a relatively small set of players helped address the news and information needs of the city. But the local information scene was changing quickly. As business woes weakened traditional media, a diverse mix of Internet-enabled news and information experiments had cropped up – experiments conducted by a mix of new players, from innovative grassroots organizations and promising for-profit news providers, to freelancers. Players like these were starting to help fill the community's information needs at a hyper-local level, but few people in Chicago (even the innovators themselves) had any idea how large this under-the-radar resource had become.

## **Responding to the Changing Information and Media Landscape**

The Trust set out to change that with the launch of “Community News Matters” with a KCIC grant in 2009. Under the leadership of Trust Vice President Ngoan Le and consultant Vivian Vahlberg, the community foundation redefined who was eligible to receive grants, opening itself up to a much more diverse pool of ideas. In the process, the Trust leveraged one of its most vital assets: its deep understanding of and connections to local grassroots leaders who might fall outside the radar of larger national funders, or are too small or inaccessible to be visible to individual donors. The Trust was uniquely positioned to raise their individual profiles and underwrite their ability to work collectively to better address the growing gap of community information needs. As the “Community News Matters” project developed, the Trust also succeeded in raising its own visibility and reputation as a new go-to player in creating and advancing solutions to community information challenges at the local level.

Ironically, the Trust’s approach to the process was not so innovative when first conceived. The Trust initially viewed the KCIC opportunity as a way to connect Chicago residents with useful information about their own neighborhoods and the surrounding region. The Trust’s first idea for the KCIC grant was to create a digital platform that would link the residents of several neighborhoods on Chicago’s South Side to a range of civic services and activities. As the Trust prepared to start developing a digital platform for hyper-local news, it formed an advisory committee to help refine its approach, which included experts in new media technology at the McCormick and MacArthur Foundations and individuals from other networks.

## **Developing Insights**

This committee quickly disabused the Trust of the idea that another web portal was what Chicago needed. The participants first convinced the Trust that it did not have the required expertise in the online news space to launch and operate its own site. Second, the foundation’s leadership learned of the many hyper-local news sites that already existed, many of them doing excellent work. The Trust switched gears and considered how they could enter this arena in a more thoughtful way. “We needed to go back to the basics of being a community foundation...when we are entering a new area, we do research. We have to understand the needs,” explained Terry Mazany, CEO of the Trust. What the Trust did possess was the ability to conduct research and the power to convene key players. Using these strengths as a starting point for their thinking, the staff quickly realized that the role the Trust was best poised to play was not to introduce yet another information site into the already-crowded landscape, but instead to help the existing field of players find ways to thrive by working together more collaboratively and in new ways.



## Mapping the Ecosystem

As a first step, the foundation commissioned research through a local partner, the Community Media Workshop, to map and document the full extent of Chicago's new media ecosystem. The resulting report, *New News 2009*, included a survey and ranking of more than 80 of Chicago's almost 200 online news sites, and provided a way to navigate the universe of the existing sites. In the same way *Zagat* helps diners select among a variety of potential restaurant options, the foundation's survey defined the field and helped citizens and funders distinguish between the dozens of local online news sites.

This was the first comprehensive mapping of the city's news and information ecosystem, and it revealed a nascent hierarchy of influence and reach among the various sites. It also unleashed a chorus of complaints about who was or wasn't included, and critiques of the foundation's ranking methodology. Undeniably, the project raised the visibility of an ecosystem of local media sites that up until then was obscure and difficult to navigate for average local users. The foundation had in effect helped local residents see the forest for the trees in the tangled and crowded local site landscape. The process of commissioning the *New News Report* generated another important outcome: it helped the Trust understand that it could best serve the community's information and news deficit by supporting and enhancing—rather than competing with—existing local efforts. So Trust leaders scrapped their plans to launch a new web portal, and instead developed the Community News Matters program.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### **Community News Matters: Supporting Local Media Innovators**

Announced in August 2009, CNM is a competitive grantmaking program in which the Trust awards grants and contracts to Chicago-area innovators for activities and projects that improve the city's information ecosystem.

**The CNM program is designed to reward innovators whose ideas address two key community needs:**

- Increase the flow of truthful, accurate and insightful local news and information in the region in new ways that engage residents, highlight important issues and enable people to work together to find solutions to local problems.
- Help the region's new media leaders to develop new business models and processes for providing community information that can be sustainable in the future.

Community News Matters was designed as an open RFP process—a key reason for all of the initial buzz and excitement when the Trust announced the program. All told, for the first CNM grant cycle, the Trust received 86 requests for a total of \$5.7 million in support (more than ten times the funds they had to award); they ultimately presented a total of \$500,000 to 12 recipients.

## **II. Beyond Grantmaking: Foundation Leadership**

The Community News Matters program has allowed the foundation to play roles that go far beyond that of grantmaker. The Trust has enhanced its role as a regional leader by engaging in the area of information access and online news. It commissions research, builds grantee capacity, convenes partners and fosters relationships for further collaboration—all roles that extend the reach and visibility of the foundation and complement its other efforts to address a broad range of issues facing Chicago.



## **1. Developing New Insights**

Defining the need for and commissioning research is a critical way that community foundations identify the range of local needs. Because it was new to the topic of new media and community information, the Trust realized that its best role initially would be to commission research that would generate insights that could benefit all of its partners, including grantees, other funders and fellow researchers.

Building on the success of the Trust-commissioned research completed by the Community Media Workshop (CMW) for the *New News Report* in 2009, the Trust had CMW produce a follow-up report in the fall of 2010. Still making sense of the critiques of the rankings presented in the report's inaugural year, a hard ranking was not included in *New News 2010*. In the next edition, the Trust wants to resume ranking sites, which it believes help people make sense of the community information ecosystem in the region. As for the inevitable controversy that ratings cause, the Trust is not worried; controversy builds interest in and visibility for the sector.

## **2. Facilitating New Partnerships**

Through the Community News Matters program, the Trust has been the link through which local organizations and funders have connected and formed fruitful partnerships, thereby advancing the foundation's programmatic goals. One of the goals of the program is to increase the flow of local news and information, especially in low-income or underserved communities. One grantee, Gapers Block Media, set out as part of its Community News Matters grant to produce stories about and for people in less-wealthy communities who they had not been successfully reaching. Gapers Block is a Chicago-centric website that provides information on news, events and other happenings in the city that has been particularly successful in establishing connections to other sites in Chicago's vast online news ecosystem. Gapers Block is very effective at reaching and covering the city's white, middle- to upper-income neighborhoods on Chicago's North Side, but has, at the same time, struggled to reach a diverse audience.



## Inspiring Grantees to Collaborate

Through the Community News Matters program, Gapers Block connected with another grantee, the Chicago Association of Hispanic Journalists. This association used its CNM grant to develop a new Chicago-focused site to promote the work of Chicago-area journalists, assign reporters to address gaps in coverage about issues of interest to the city's large Latino community, and train and mentor student and citizen journalists. Gapers Block hopes that the association's network of members and student trainees will provide an excellent pipeline of ideas and writers for Gapers Block, which needs high quality content that is also relevant to underserved communities – specifically, Chicago's Latino community. Because Gapers Block offers market-rate compensation for freelance stories (equivalent to what a freelance writer working for a traditional major news daily would make), the partnership is a “win” for the association, which hopes the collaboration will provide some income for current and future Hispanic journalists and expose their work through one of the city's most well-connected websites.

“Bringing structure to the network to pursue the Community News Matters grant has helped us be smart about future opportunities. [Now we see] that more is possible.”

– Community News Matters Grantee

## Connecting Nonprofits to Funders

As the Trust has forged partnerships and stronger connections among grantees, it has also fostered partnerships that extend beyond Community News Matters participants. One grantee had no existing relationship with the McCormick and MacArthur foundations prior to CNM. “Nobody who's doing what I'm doing has any sort of connection to those foundations,” explained the project's leader. But after receiving a CNM award, this new media leader was approached by the McCormick Foundation for his input on a subsequent *Hacks and Hackers* event the foundation was sponsoring. Grantees also report that support from the Trust has better positioned them to approach other foundations for potential funding.

## Taking Collective Action in the Ecosystem

Finally, the focus on forming and enabling partnerships among Trust grantees has resulted in heightened levels of coordination and collective action across the broader ecosystem of actors in the hyper-local online media space. Through its commissioned



research and in informal conversations with its grantees, the Trust learned that many of the smaller, locally-focused media organizations were concerned about their sustainability and unsure of how to use advertising to generate revenue. Several CNM grantees had dreamed of creating an advertising network, in which smaller sites could band together and offer advertisers a larger market than any one of them could do alone – a network that could provide them long-term, sustaining support. But none had the connections, time or expertise to pursue the idea. The Trust recognized the opportunity, gathered site operators to discuss it, and then funded a feasibility study that will determine whether the idea will work in Chicago and provide a start-up road map. Before Community News Matters, the Trust wouldn't have had the knowledge or connections to have taken this on; now that the Trust had worked to build a community of new-media innovators, no one was better suited to play this catalytic role.

### ***3. Amplifying the Foundation's Visibility and Local Prominence***

A final outgrowth of launching the Community News Matters program is the emergence of a true funder collaborative around community information and news with the Trust in the center of the action. As it began Community News Matters, the Trust reached out to the other major local funders of news and information – MacArthur and McCormick – to see whether it might make sense to collaborate. It was the first time the three had ever met to strategize about news and information. As a result of that meeting, the McCormick Foundation went on to host the first meeting of Chicago-area foundations interested in funding information projects, working with the Trust to introduce other funders into the mix.

As a result, smaller funders in the region have since become involved, including The Richard H. Driehaus Foundation and the Woods Fund of Chicago. These funders welcome the Trust's convening efforts as they perceive the foundation to operate from an important point of neutrality; one funder compared the Trust's role to that of "a Switzerland that is able to bring partners together in a welcoming and collaborative manner." Just as the Trust's grantees perceive the community foundation to be playing an important and unique convening role based on its deep connections in the community and its locally-focused approach, funders in Chicago are beginning to see the Trust as playing a similar role among philanthropists as well.

**“Through the leadership of Knight and The Chicago Community Trust, others came into the fold – including us. The Trust's reputation is strong. There is a perception that they have been more aggressive, more activist, more proactive in the community information needs space.” – Local funder**



### III. Lessons in Leadership

The Chicago Community Trust has long been renowned and respected for its efforts to address key issues affecting Chicago's residents, including its support for some news-related programming. The KCIC grant provided the opportunity for the Trust to step into a more prominent leadership role in a realm where there was limited sustained philanthropic interest. The Trust's efforts have served an important function in raising awareness of community information needs among other funders in the city—a number of whom are now joining the Trust to support elements of the ecosystem. The research and gatherings funded by the KCIC grant have made the landscape more comprehensible to both those leading it and those with the means to support it. Finally, through the Community News Matters program, the Trust has been able to leverage its local knowledge and connections to regional leaders to make community information needs a subject of primary concern for those who care about the strength of Chicago's urban fabric. Community-based leaders, funders and individual participants in the online news ecosystem have taken note of the Trust's active, innovative efforts and perceptions of the foundation have shifted. The foundation is increasingly seen as a community leader that can set the agenda in addition to being an invaluable civic resource.

# About

## John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation advances journalism in the digital age and invests in the vitality of communities where the Knight brothers once owned newspapers. Knight Foundation focuses on projects that promote informed and engaged communities and lead to transformational change. The Knight Community Information Challenge is part of the foundation's Media Innovation Initiative, a \$100-million plus effort to meet America's information needs. The Challenge is a \$24-million contest that helps community and place-based foundations find creative ways to use new media and technology to keep residents informed and engaged.

> For more information on the challenge, visit [informationneeds.org](http://informationneeds.org).

## FSG

FSG is a nonprofit consulting firm specializing in strategy, evaluation and research, founded in 2000 as Foundation Strategy Group and celebrating a decade of global social impact. Today, FSG works across sectors in every region of the globe—partnering with foundations, corporations, nonprofits, and governments to develop more effective solutions to the world's most challenging issues. FSG brings together leaders that are hungry to exchange information, elevate learning, and create collective impact in discovering better ways to solve the world's most difficult social problems.

> For more information, visit [fsg.org](http://fsg.org).

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