

Community Builder: Investing in people can pay big dividends

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By Steve Boyarsky for the Mail Tribune

***Editor's note:** Community Builder is a periodic Q & A series providing perspectives from local people who have been involved in significant change in Southern Oregon. Today's conversation is with Kathy Bryon, executive director of the Gordon Elwood Foundation.*

Q: It seems like you are involved in many projects and conversations in the region.

Kathy: I'm an organizer by heart and background. My early "training" began as the oldest daughter of a single mother of three children. When I became a YMCA camp counselor at age 16 charged with supervising 13 5-year-old boys in the first week of the summer, I think that basically set the trajectory of my future.

Q: What does your work with the Gordon Elwood Foundation entail?

Kathy: The Gordon Elwood Foundation is a philanthropic nonprofit set up with the financial resources of a man who most people in Medford thought was homeless. Gordon passed away in 1999, and much to everyone's surprise he left about \$9 million to be used to "do good" for the people in four Southern Oregon counties. He met with the board of directors twice before he died. The board created the mission to invest in children, individuals, families and communities. We have two grant cycles during the year to provide support for the work of

nonprofits in the four-county region. A good portion of my time and the foundation's resources are invested in supporting opportunities to build relationships between organizations that serve their communities.

It happens in a whole bunch of ways. It might be in the form of a grant to a local organization. Or it could be helping an organization improve their grant application or helping to strengthen their ability to deliver on their program or mission. It could be bringing together the leadership of specific organizations who have interest or responsibility in a particular issue. Take our lower-than-national-average high school graduation rate. To increase our graduation rate, we must recognize it is not just a school issue, it is a community issue. To make the change we want to see, we need to have people from business, health care, public health, education, social services, faith-based groups, parents and students in the room together to understand how this affects us all. We helped convene a group of community and education leaders called Southern Oregon Success to look at the dropout issue and its relationship to workforce readiness and the impact on personal and community health.

Q: What are some of the more pressing needs you see in our region?

Kathy: What continues to concern me is the high percentage of poverty in the region. We have a better opportunity to understand what is going on in our community because of a study done some time ago called the Adverse Childhood Experience Study. In the last year, the researchers involved in that national study have been working with people in our region to see how our various communities are affected by adverse childhood experiences. The outcome of a high number of adverse childhood experiences result in behaviors like drug and alcohol abuse, violence, homelessness and chronic diseases, which represent the most pressing realities or needs we see because they impact the entire community. But in order to change lives, we need to go "upstream" of poverty, drug addiction and poor school attendance starting early, and ask each child, family or individual what is happening or what has happened to them instead of only punishing them for not showing up for school or being addicted or homeless.

Q: What does the ACES research tell us, and why is it important to Southern Oregon?

Kathy: ACES has shown that adversities you experience as a small child, such as living with parents with depression, divorce or domestic violence, emotional or sexual abuse, an incarcerated parent, or family homelessness, does impact your brain functioning, your behavior and your physical health. These experiences negatively impact school attendance, ability to pay attention in class, and for many students a situation where dropping out is easier. An adult with a high number of adverse childhood experiences is more likely to have chronic diseases, like heart and lung disease, or obesity, which leads to all kinds of other chronic diseases. This research has shown there is a progressive nature to adversity. And populations with a high prevalence of adverse childhood experiences carry more risk. Our region has been identified with a high level of adult diseases and situations, which tells us many adults experienced adversity as children, and their children are experiencing adversity in their homes now. We need to address that full on.

Q: How has ACES connected to the foundation's work?

Kathy: This research is an example of why bringing together people who don't usually get in the same room is important, so we can learn about issues that impact each of us or our sector and our community as a whole. It's complex human stuff that can't be solved by quick fixes or even by remedies that we think we already have. Really, this work of initiating and supporting collaborative learning or learning communities has become the focus of the foundation over the past 10 years. We know we can't fix broad-based problems with the grants we make or even fund any one organization to fix a problem that is as complex as the high school dropout rate. But we can help support bringing people and organizations together over a period of time to learn about the complexity of the situation and to create new ways to work with students and families toward shared goals of housing, personal health, employment and high school graduation.

Q: Can you provide a few examples of your work?

Kathy: We were one of the initiators and continue to support two collaborative community platforms — Jefferson Regional Health Alliance and Southern Oregon Success. They don't do the work of change, but they are the convening bodies or backbone organizations to support learning and actions regarding an

issue. They are "think tanks," you could say, as a means to approach an issue differently and together. The pilot programs sponsored by these collaborative platforms give us a way to see what needs to happen differently. One small example of this would be the new employment position called Community Health Worker. This is a direct outgrowth of an idea that germinated among members of the Jefferson Regional Health Alliance, which caused Rogue Community College to design a curriculum for such a certification program in their new health care program. This new certification is becoming a career pathway for individuals who have survived PTSD or moved through recovery so they can get back into the workforce and use their "lived experience" to help motivate others who are struggling with similar issues.

Q: How did you come to live in Southern Oregon?

Kathy: I had recently gotten married, and my husband at the time had been hired to his first post-training job here. I was offered a position in a newly created organization that wanted to improve the lives of people in Northern California and Southern Oregon by strengthening nonprofit organizations. This was right after the timber industry decline, so public resources had dwindled dramatically. Together we created significant momentum for the nonprofit sector here.

Q: What is the role of nonprofits?

Kathy: The voluntary sector is a key component to our democratic society. We are not all born into situations that guarantee an equal voice. Historically people in this country come together to address inequities that exist, and we improve our governmental practices and democracy as a result. March of Dimes, for example, originated to deal with the polio epidemic, and after that was cured in this country it reformatted its mission to support prevention of all childhood diseases. Through the involvement of groups of people, our country and our democracy evolves to include more voices and perspectives. It is because of community or voluntary sector organizing and advocacy that we have some of our most critical state and federal programs: Headstart, Medicare, Medicaid, Americans with Disabilities Act, School Lunch Program and Meals on Wheels,

among others. In Oregon, nonprofit organizations employ about 13 percent of the private-sector workforce. I would guess that everyone in Oregon benefits from the work of at least one nonprofit organization.

Q: What would make our region a better place to live?

Kathy: I think Southern Oregon is an incredibly desirable place to live. I think the challenge is how to ensure that all children, individuals and families who live here can experience its desirability. Our shared dilemma is how can we all have our basic human living requirements met — healthy food, sufficient housing and affordable housing for the entire workforce spectrum, for seniors and those with disabilities? How can we develop a more diversified employer base, making sure we have the education sector in alignment with workforce opportunities and placements? And how do we ensure that everyone who lives here is able to participate in education and the workforce so then they can have a livable life in a place that is very desirable?

Q: How do you measure satisfaction in your work?

Kathy: What I really love is that I work with people who are looking at the big picture and the long term. So for me, luckily, I have the ability to wait long periods of time to see change happen. That is not always easy, because it's really the invisible work. But it sets the tone. It is like being a parent; you don't really get to see how your kids turn out until they are gone and someone else tells you. But I will say there is nothing more fun for me than the little things that happen along the way. Connecting people with information, demystifying something, and supporting possibilities in whatever way I can.

Q: How do you know something has worked?

Kathy: In 2005, I was invited to meet with Club Latino students at Rogue Community College and their mentors Pedro Cabrera and Luis Navarrete. I listened to the students' desire to make high school better for those learning English as a second language who were coming up behind them. Their desire fueled an incredible year-long process involving more than 75 different community leaders and resulted in what they envisioned and a whole lot more. I watched those students take their experience of making a difference and reach their own dreams. Now they are leaders in our health and education systems and

are making a huge difference. Participating with those students around their desire to create opportunity for others and seeing how they continue to be agents of positive change for our community tells me it works. The work is never done, community building is always unfinished business, as it should be, because we continue to grow and change with all that happens.

Q: What are you most hopeful about for our community?

Kathy: I am excited that we, as a community, are beginning to turn together toward this idea of how trauma, either caused by neglect or abuse, affects children and our whole community. And I think that is the underlying vision of the Gordon Elwood Foundation. We know that Gordon Elwood suffered a lot of adversity, as did his family members, and it's rather perfect that his resources would be used to promote that understanding and change in our community.

— Steve Boyarsky is a retired educator and longtime resident of the Rogue Valley. He continues to be involved in educational and youth programs.

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