



## A Museum Adapts for Families Touched by Autism

When the Niantic Children's Museum opens its doors at 5pm on the third Thursday of each month, its lights are dimmed, noisy toys and machines are off, and voices are soft.

It's the time when the Museum becomes a haven for children and their families affected by autism.

Up to 100 children and their families — from as far away as Rhode Island — wander in. Some retreat to the quiet corners of the museum. Others wear headphones or gravitate to sensory balls or crafts. Parents easily converse, sewing the bonds unique to families with children who learn differently.

All have pre-registered for these “sensory friendly evenings,” thoughtfully created by the Museum's educators.

As children adjust to their surroundings over the course of the evening, air machines ease on, sending spinning balls and scarves floating into the air. Educators gently introduce bubbles, art or science activities, or water play. Meet the Animals Day is a crowd favorite.

Russ Rothan, the Museum's executive director, reflects on the program's success in meeting a previously unmet community need. “It's not like any other day at the museum,” he says. “Since things like noise or flashing lights are often triggers for children with sensory sensitivities, we shut them off for the first half hour. It's all about providing calming activities kids can approach at their own speed.”

Especially gratifying to Rothan are the connections he observes between families.

“Sometimes a child struggles, and there's huge understanding, tolerance, and support from the other parents,” he says. “They can share experiences and learn from each other here. And for parents to also be able to engage in something fun with their kids, in an environment *adapted for them*...there's a real beauty and richness to that. It's a model for how a museum can work.”

*This program is partly funded through a grant from the Community Foundation. [Photo courtesy of the Niantic Children's Museum]*

## We are all in — together.



The programs celebrated in these pages represent what creates a strong, caring community. It is all about meeting people where they are, helping in meaningful ways, and moving Eastern Connecticut closer to being a healthy, thriving, sustainable region, with greater equity for all. These stories exemplify the creativity and commitment

that people across our region bring to this vision.

We are proud to support this important work. Yet for too many children and families, the weight of poverty crushes their opportunities to thrive. We hear about tough choices and anxieties that families face daily. Working families are compelled to choose between a car payment, food, and rent.

In order to tackle these hardships, the Community Foundation has joined forces with numerous partners to lead the campaign to “End Child Poverty Now.” We are a diverse coalition of nonprofits and funders from Eastern Connecticut and across the state united in our commitment to ensure that every child in every zip code has access to basic necessities, a quality education, secure housing, and a nurturing environment that fosters their physical, emotional and intellectual growth.

We know that when children thrive, families and communities do better — and that is good for all of us. Together, we can end child poverty in our state. We hope you will join us in this work — we owe it to our kids.

Be well.

President & CEO

## The Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut

### VISION

A healthy, thriving, sustainable Eastern Connecticut with greater equity for all.

### MISSION

Collaborate with partners to put philanthropy into action to address the needs, rights and interests of our community in Eastern Connecticut.

### VALUES

Integrity, Equity, Respect, Courage, Empathy

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## Congratulations to Jennifer!

Program Director Jennifer O'Brien celebrates her 25th anniversary with the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut this year. That is no small feat and we want to take this opportunity to recognize her for all her hard work and dedication. Her contributions have made a significant impact on our community, as well as on our organization. Thank you, Jenn, for being an invaluable member of the team!

*Photo: In October 2023, the Public Library of New London recognized Jennifer (right) for her contribution to the library's growth and well-being. With Jennifer is library board chair Daneen Roth.*



## A Rugby Family Forms in Norwich

None of the teen rugby players on the Rose City Raptors had ever played the sport before. Now, after one season together, they call each other “family.”

Some Norwich youth face barriers to participating in organized sports — unaffordable fees, transportation, limited opportunities. Moreover, the mental health effects from the COVID pandemic still reverberate.

The new Raptors team (*pictured*), comprised of boys from Norwich high schools, shattered those barriers.

Jake Dilts, assistant program director at Norwich Youth, Family & Recreation Services, formed and coached the team. He knew the unique bonding culture of the sport could be a game changer for Norwich youth.

“It comes from the vulnerability of not wearing pads. Kids of all shapes and sizes are out there and gain respect by just trying. And every player gets to carry the ball and tackle, so each can succeed — it’s not one person doing all the scoring. They learn that the more they pass the ball and use their teammates, the more success they all have.”

Dilts also points to the camaraderie gained from what rugby teams call “the third half.” It’s the time right after the game when a team invites its opponent to its sideline to share food

*“Team sports teach trust, discipline, and confidence. It provides another family to be part of. Often it provides a positive male role model. The Rose City Raptors was all that and more for my son.”*

— Parent of Rose City Raptors player

and discuss the game. “We battle each other on the field for 80 minutes, then the kids share pizza, tell stories, and become friends.”

Off the field, the team also made profound strides. Seventy-five percent of the players improved their grades and 87% maintained or improved school attendance. And, most of the Raptors signed up to attend Connecticut Youth Service Bureaus Day at the State Capitol. They learned from state leaders about the process of making community change.

A Community Foundation grant via the Connecticut Social Equity Council (SEC) was vital to the launch of the Rose City Raptors. With SEC grants unexpectedly cancelled in 2024 (they hope to re-open in 2025), Norwich Youth, Family & Recreation Services is now exploring options to continue growing the rugby program to include multiple teams for boys and girls.



## Connecticut Humane Society Offers a Helping Paw

It's an impossible choice: you finally find an affordable apartment to rent in northeastern Connecticut that also welcomes your beloved dog. But you can't manage the costs of your dog's vaccines, or perhaps the additional pet security deposit required by the landlord. What do you do?

The Connecticut Humane Society (CHS) is stepping in to prevent anguished decisions like these by offering vaccines, pet food, and veterinary care. And if a person is evicted or in a temporary living situation, the agency can board a pet short-term until a person achieves stable housing. For people striving to make ends meet, especially older adults who may find companionship only in their pets, the assistance can be life-changing.

CHS offers free veterinary care clinics at human services agencies like the Thompson Ecumenical Empowerment Group (TEEG). There, participants and their pets hailing from 11 northeastern Connecticut towns get care and support.

Kerry Garofano, CHS's assistant director of development, marketing, and community outreach, says it's not unusual to hear stories of people rationing their own meals to ensure their pets have enough to eat.

Imagine the relief and gratitude when CHS makes it possible for pet owners to live together with their dogs or cats and get the nourishment each needs!

Garofano credits the Community Foundation's grants and the years-long partnership between agencies for the customized care CHS provides. One shining example relates to pet food.

She reports, "We get to know owners and their pets through repeated mobile clinic visits. We learn what type of diet each pet requires, then we provide a 1-3 month supply of the same food. That continuity can prevent the GI issues that occur when pets switch foods frequently." Beyond nutrition, CHS veterinarians treat pet health issues and provide preventive treatments to avoid costly health issues down the road.

In the end, owners and pets can thrive together.

*Photo: Connecticut Humane Society's veterinary team cares for pets at a mobile clinic set up at TEEG in Thompson, Connecticut. [Photo by Joyce Comer]*

## Fertilizing Futures at the Yellow Farmhouse

At the heart of a novel partnership aimed at educating young people about food waste lies a surprising resource: nutrient-rich worm poop.

It's true! The Yellow Farmhouse Education Center, using land at Stone Acres Farm in Stonington, is poised to harness the power of specialized worms to turn organic waste into highly marketable, natural fertilizer.

The effort is a win-win — not only for the environment, but for the students with developmental disabilities at New London's Ocean Avenue LEARNing Academy who are preparing to enter the workforce.

The Farmhouse makes it possible for young people of all abilities to learn the job skills involved in the process of "vermicomposting." Matt Durham, a Yellow Farmhouse educator, said students will manage loading all the food scraps and decomposed leaves from the farm into a 24-foot-long worm bin. They'll monitor essential factors like temperature and moisture levels as Red Wiggler worms consume and digest the waste, turning it into dense, rich fertilizer.

"Imagine all that waste going into a landfill! Instead, we can return those nutrients back to the soil," Durham said.

In addition to their hands-on experiences managing the commercial-scale vermicomposting program, students will gain the 'soft skills' vital to other jobs — scheduling, record keeping, and communications.



The LEARNing Academy is no stranger to the Yellow Farmhouse. Students have visited seasonally to learn food preservation methods including properly storing vegetables (drying winter squashes and garlic), dehydrating (drying herbs), and fermenting techniques (processing cucumbers into pickles).

Yellow Farmhouse's executive director, Jen Rothman, highlighted a staggering reality: about 24% of all food in the U.S. is wasted.

"We want to grow awareness about all the different points along the food system where waste occurs — from home kitchens to restaurants to grocery stores — so people can understand all the places where they can make change."

*The Community Foundation is one of several funders for this program.*



*Photos: Students from the LEARNing Academy prepare a meal with squash they harvested at Yellow Farmhouse just two days prior!*



## Where Values are a Compass for Meaningful Careers

Seventeen years ago, Access Community Action Agency launched a transformative program for Willimantic-area women, offering training to advance their employment options.

Since then, scores of determined women have completed the 11-week program. Some walked miles to attend. Others juggled childcare responsibilities or worked all day, then hustled over to class. Meeting twice a week, the women tackled Google Workspace tools, banking and budgeting.

Through grants from the Community Foundation and other funders, Access has added 1:1 coaching and personalized case management. This crucial support has helped participants navigate job search tools, master interview skills, repair credit, and revise resumes.

In the past year, 88 program participants tenaciously charted a path out of poverty toward fulfilling careers — and new lives.

Kathleen Krider, Access's senior director of community engagement and resource management, says it was especially meaningful — and motivating — for women to be asked, some for the first time, "What would you like to do for a career?"

She explained, "We work with a group of women who are already marginalized by poverty, language issues or immigration status. So, to be asked what matters to them, and to then be assisted in looking for work that *attaches to those values*...It's so exciting, especially for those who hadn't ever considered a job beyond retail or fast food."

Access's approach opened minds to new career hopes and dreams — and helped participants form the plans for achieving them.

Susan\* is one of the many success stories. After suffering a personal tragedy and living on just \$500 a month with no car or job prospects, she joined the Access employment program. Now, Susan is a Windham Hospital employee who earned a signing bonus and full benefits, and she no longer requires state assistance to get by.

No doubt, more successes are on the horizon for Willimantic-area women.

*Photo: employment program participants provided by Access Community Action Agency.*

\*Not her real name.

# Join us in supporting two transformative initiatives: the Brighter Futures Fund and the Fund for Racial Justice

We invite you to help us reach our fundraising goal of \$1 million for each fund by the end of 2024! We are grateful to all donors who have contributed to these funds. The lists below recognize gifts of \$10,000 and above.

## **Brighter Futures Fund:** **\$691,077 raised to date**

The Fund will advance equitable outcomes to improve the lives of children and youth throughout Eastern Connecticut and create a better future for the next generation.

### **Benefactor \$100,000+**

Anonymous (2)

### **Ambassador \$50,000+**

Mary & John LaMattina  
Gordon Murphy

### **Visionary \$25,000+**

Kathy & Ted Parker

### **Pioneer \$10,000+**

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## **Fund for Racial Justice:** **\$723,270 raised to date**

The Fund aims to increase education and awareness of racial inequities, work towards solutions that build greater understanding, and move the needle towards racial equity and justice in Eastern Connecticut.

### **Benefactor \$100,000+**

Anonymous

### **Ambassador \$50,000+**

Anonymous  
Mary & John LaMattina

### **Visionary \$25,000+**

Kathy & Ted Parker

### **Pioneer \$10,000+**

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## Build a Fund at the Community Foundation

You can direct all your philanthropy, now and in the future, to the causes you care about most with an individually tailored fund.

We offer guidance in helping you establish a fund that best suits your individual financial and family circumstances. This may include the option of hybrid fund models, advice with complex assets, ability to pledge over multiple years, and expert assistance in estate planning options.

## CONNECT YOUR PASSION TO A PURPOSE

Contribute to your own or an existing fund and/or promote your Community Foundation's work through these funds:

- **Fund for Racial Justice** advances racial equity, supports racial justice organizing and advocacy, and allocates flexible resources to organizations and movements led by people of color.
- **Brighter Futures Fund** works toward advancing equitable outcomes to improve the lives of children and youth.
- **Community Leadership Fund** helps us to build powerful partnerships that strengthen our region's nonprofits in their work within our priority areas.
- **President's Discretionary Fund** enables us to provide leadership when needed and to back innovative projects as they emerge.
- **Women & Girls Funds** help to empower women and girls wherever you choose in Eastern Connecticut.

Contact our Development Team at [development@cfect.org](mailto:development@cfect.org) or 860.442.3572 for a confidential conversation about achieving your charitable goals through the Community Foundation.