



## Windham's Natchaug School Grooves to Global Rhythms — With a Spark from the Ossen Fund

In Windham's vibrant Natchaug Elementary School, the halls are pulsing with new rhythms, thanks to a grant from the Community Foundation's Ossen Fund for the Arts. The grant brought a symphony of percussion instruments to the students, filling the air with the lively beats of snare drums, splash sticks, flamenco cajones, bongos, and hi-hat cymbals.

But these instruments aren't your typical school fare — and that's exactly what spirited music teacher, Dr. Carlos Ocasio Rivera (*pictured*), has in mind. He wants to immerse students in the rich tapestry of global rhythms while honing their musical talents with more complex beats. It's both challenging and meaningful.

"The students learn the structure of music and the discipline it takes to be a musician — to play, to listen, to make eye contact, to respect each other, and to collaborate," Rivera says. "They connect with each other through rhythm, and these social connections give them a sense of being part of something special."

With the new grant in hand last year, Rivera purchased instruments reflecting the cultural mosaic of Natchaug's student body, starting with cajones and bongos to connect many of the school's students to their Mexican and Puerto Rican roots. He proudly notes how the music program mirrors the school's bilingual curriculum, where students seamlessly switch between Spanish and English throughout the day. (Natchaug, in fact, was named the Connecticut Association of Schools 2024 Elementary School of the Year!)

Witnessing the transformation firsthand, Rivera is amazed by the progress and passion of his students. For him, the impact has been profound and inspiring, especially for the Guatemalan students who never before had the opportunity to study music. Now he marvels at their mastery of rhythmic skills.

At Natchaug, it's not just about learning music — it's about embracing a global harmony of cultures and fostering creativity that knows no bounds.

*Continued on page 2 >>>*

## Investing in Futures — from Cradle to Career



Philanthropy and advocacy are deeply intertwined in realizing the vision of healthy, thriving, and more equitable communities. In this newsletter, you'll delve into stories highlighting that work — focusing on children and youth.

Young people need to be plugged into resources, supportive relationships, and opportunities that enhance their well-being. Yet, some youth within our region lack these vital connections, often due to systemic inequalities. That's why it's essential to provide the resources necessary to fuel their growth and success.

Over the past year, our dedicated coalition of local and statewide advocacy organizations developed a shared action plan aimed at advancing equity and justice in Connecticut. It may not surprise you to learn that, despite our diverse missions (from housing to the environment!), ending child poverty was at the fore.

The consensus was clear: In Connecticut, one of the nation's wealthiest states, ending child poverty is our top priority to provide our region's young residents with the best shot to reach their full potential in life.

Within these pages you'll discover an exciting and bold step forward toward that goal: Connecticut's new Baby Bonds program. Further, we're thrilled to share stories of some of the Community Foundation's grantees who superbly support our region's youth as they look towards adulthood.

Your generosity and energy have played a meaningful role in making these endeavors possible. *Thank you.*

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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The Ossen Fund also supported the creation of a huge "heritage mural" of North and South American countries at the school. It's a source of pride, since Natchaug's 269 students hail from 17 countries!

Scan the QR code to see Natchaug School soar with song — with their new instruments!



*Photo: Staff and students pose on the playground. Every student at the school painted a piece of the mural. [Photo courtesy of Natchaug Elementary School]*



Connecticut Legal Services Attorney Nilda Rodriguez Havrilla facilitates the conversation with Dr. Darrick Hamilton and Treasurer Erick Russell.

## A Bold Step Toward Easing Child Poverty in Connecticut: Baby Bonds

In February, the Community Foundation sponsored a community forum at Mitchell College featuring two originators of our state's new "Baby Bonds" program, the first of its kind in the nation. Erick Russell, Connecticut State Treasurer, and Dr. Darrick Hamilton, the Henry Cohen Professor of Economics at The New School, discussed the anticipated impacts of this groundbreaking anti-poverty legislation.

**Here are six key takeaways from their comments on Baby Bonds:**

- 1** Connecticut's Baby Bonds program is ultimately about addressing cycles of generational poverty. For every child born into poverty in Connecticut as of July 1, 2023, \$3,200 is automatically invested in a trust on their behalf. The money, managed by the Treasurer's office, grows over the life of the child. In effect, the Bonds are a form of "social insurance," providing some future stability for the child.
- 2** Bonds will provide some capital so people can maximize opportunity and change their economic circumstances in a meaningful way. Beginning at age 18, enrollees can access the accrued money and use it to pursue higher education or job training, purchase a home in Connecticut, or invest in a Connecticut business. The accumulated bond value is projected to be between \$11,000 and \$24,000.
- 3** The Baby Bonds program is also an investment in Connecticut. The program is designed to keep people in Connecticut.

*The Community Foundation has joined with local and statewide nonprofits to advocate for a thriving, economically robust Connecticut, where no child experiences poverty's debilitating effects. We are urging elected officials to enact policies addressing the root causes of child poverty, including access to healthcare, safe and affordable homes, and quality education. The Baby Bonds program is one such policy.*

- It provides an incentive for young people to start their families, careers, or businesses here — in their own communities.
- 4** Baby Bonds will not close the wealth gap completely. That will take a combination of investments in early childhood, education and housing in our state.
  - 5** The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights\* includes economic rights — the right to a job, to health care, and to a baseline standard of living that people need to thrive. Baby Bond investments provide the resources people need not only for security, but to reap the rewards of their ingenuity and efforts.
  - 6** The Baby Bonds program will benefit babies across Connecticut, even from the wealthiest communities in our state where people don't think poverty exists. In the first six months of the program, babies that qualified were born in 164 of 169 Connecticut towns.

\*The United States led the drafting of the Declaration.



[Photo provided by Save the Sound]

## From Classrooms to Culverts: Groton Students Step Up to Restore Waterways

Beneath the bridges spanning the flowing rivers and streams of Groton and Ledyard, you might have spotted an unlikely group of environmental stewards: teens clad in waders, armed with measuring devices and clipboards.

Led by the knowledgeable Jon Vander Werff, a fish biologist for Save the Sound, these inquisitive Ella T. Grasso Technical High School students (pictured) were surveying the health of waterways under aging bridges. Their task wasn't merely academic; it was vital to preserve wildlife habitats and to safeguard local residents.

You see, within the murky depths of the culverts, underwater pipes and structures can block an array of aquatic insects, fish, turtles, frogs, and other species from migrating along the stream. Many can't survive. And debris clogging culverts or bridges increases risks for road flooding and washouts.

Energized to witness the wonders of nature and to learn about the real-world implications of hindered waterways, the

students waded through knee-high waters under the bridges. They surveyed up to five different road crossings in a day while meticulously recording their findings. Later, they reported the data to town leaders.

The impact of Save the Sound's enterprising trainees has reverberated throughout the community. Groton officials, including engineers, planners, and wetlands experts, have taken note of the invaluable research conducted by the young people. The town is exploring design options to fix the issues plaguing the compromised culverts.

Through Save the Sound's training program, more than 30 high school students each year learn the knowledge and skills to become guardians for their environment. Some have pursued college study for the green jobs of the future. As they immersed themselves in classroom learning and in-the-field river crossing assessments, they paved the way for safer, more sustainable local waterways — one culvert at a time.

## Norwich Youth Discover the Secrets of Seals from a Floating Classroom

Do you know why seals strike “banana poses” while lolling around rocks on Long Island Sound? For the answer, just ask the seventh-grade students at Kelly STEAM Magnet Middle School in Norwich.

During their half-day trip aboard EnviroLab II, a specially outfitted research vessel operated by the Groton-based nonprofit Project Oceanology, the budding young scientists spotted more than 100 seals on Long Island Sound. Along the way, they unlocked the mystery behind some quirky seal habits.

Every moment on the cutting-edge boat was an opportunity for discovery, as the students also measured wind speed and direction, recorded water and air temperatures and low tide times, and observed the seals' activities while in and out of water.

Through classroom lab experiments, Kimberly Donoghue, a marine educator at Project Oceanology, primed the young people for the adventure that awaited them. In one experiment, they observed how quickly a bowl of oatmeal would lose its heat. It soon led to a simple yet profound insight: seals adapt their body positions to keep warm. Hence, the banana poses!

For many of the 210 Kelly Middle School students who took part in Project Oceanology's “Seventh Grade at Sea” program, it was their first time on a boat — especially one equipped with such an array of scientific tools and equipment they could manipulate



and operate. Project Oceanology, founded more than 50 years ago, is dedicated to inspiring future generations to pursue STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) careers. This kind of collaborative, hands-on, experiential learning is often the springboard.

As Donoghue observed, any initial apprehension about being on the water quickly dissolved into awe and wonder as the young people encountered their first harbor seals. One student exclaimed, “This is awesome! I want to be a marine biologist!”



Photo (top): Kelly STEAM Magnet Middle School students search for seals on Long Island Sound aboard Project Oceanology's 55-foot research vessel, EnviroLab II.

Photo (left): Kelly STEAM Magnet Middle School students perform classroom lab experiments involving oatmeal and seals. [Photos provided by Project Oceanology]



## New London Preschoolers Explore New Worlds Through Stories

Folk singers, actors, former teachers, and dancers — they're southeastern Connecticut's roving teaching artists, working under the direction of the Connecticut Storytelling Center. With classrooms as their stage, they share one mission: to ignite the imaginations of young minds through the art of storytelling.

New London preschoolers were the fortunate beneficiaries of the boundless creativity of the Storytelling Center corps. Funded by grants from the Community Foundation, the storytellers worked in "residencies" at seven early education centers across the city, captivating 285 little learners.

With puppets, finger plays, rhymes, musical instruments, felt boards, songs, props, and costumes, storytellers told multicultural folktales reflecting different traditions. And they always sprinkled in the funny or unexpected. Who could resist the allure of *Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock*, a tale of a clever spider outwitting his animal friends with a touch of magic?

Ann Shapiro has led the Storytelling Center for 24 years. She's clear its goals are not about entertainment, but nurturing essential skills like listening, speaking, and visualizing — the building blocks of literacy. She sees the nagging effects of the pandemic as a significant hurdle to overcome. And she thinks it's

critical to share stories of diverse cultures and their contributions to society, so kids can learn to accept each other's differences.

"One time," she said, "I was telling a story from India, and a character was wearing a kantopi, which is like a turban. One little boy's hand shot up. He said, 'I have a kantopi! We came here from India.' And he was so excited to tell everybody about his culture. And the next week when I came, he was there wearing his kantopi."

For Shapiro, it was a poignant reminder of the profound impact storytelling can have in fostering inclusivity and acceptance.



Photos: Amy Forbes with the Connecticut Storytelling Center performs at Child & Family Agency's New London Day Nursery School.

## Caring for our Communities in Eastern Connecticut

Join us in supporting the Fund for Racial Justice and the Brighter Futures Fund!

As we look toward all that is ahead in 2024, the Community Foundation has some exciting news to share. Last year, we began fundraising campaigns for the Fund for Racial Justice and the Brighter Futures Fund. Our goal is to grow each fund to the \$1 million level by the end of this year so we can begin making grants in 2025. Once fully endowed, these two funds will continue benefitting our communities... forever!

Although we currently make grants for racial justice work and programs focused on children and youth, much of this grantmaking is limited — or non-existent — in certain parts of our region due to fund restrictions. The creation of these two funds is critical to meet the needs in all of our communities. Each year, we receive *much* more in requests than we are able to grant. These new funds will have substantial positive impact throughout the region once grantmaking begins.

The **Brighter Futures 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.

The **Fund for Racial Justice** 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.

We have received substantial gifts from donors for both funds and with your help, we can make it over the finish line! This year, the Community Foundation committed to putting \$200,000 of its own resources into the Fund for Racial Justice. A group of Pfizer friends also stepped up to contribute, bringing the fund to \$679,920. Please consider offering your support to help us close the gap.

With the generous support of a family of donors who provided a challenge match, the Brighter Futures Fund stands at \$624,338. If you want to ensure that children and youth with the least access to opportunities and critical resources get the support they deserve, we hope you will consider contributing to this fund.

At the Community Foundation, we believe that it is a collective responsibility of our society to provide safe and healthy spaces for *all* young people and to ensure fair opportunities for *all* residents in our communities.

We greatly appreciate your support and hope that you will continue to join us in moving toward justice for all in Eastern Connecticut.

Photo: Community Foundation grants support Norwich Youth & Family Services' "Summer Jam and Learn" program.





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## Build a Fund at the Community Foundation

Did you know that you can create a permanently endowed fund and build it up over time? You can start a fund and add to it over 3-5 years to reach the \$10,000 minimum (\$25,000 for scholarships). You can then add more as circumstances allow.

A long-term plan might include a legacy provision in your estate plan or naming your fund as a beneficiary of a retirement plan or life insurance policy.

## 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 Lauren C. Parda, director of development, at [lauren@cfect.org](mailto:lauren@cfect.org) or 860.442.3572 for a confidential conversation about achieving your charitable goals through the Community Foundation.