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A Harmonious Collaboration Hits the Right Notes

Turning Dreams Into Degrees at Higher Edge

You may wonder when Lena Ebersole sleeps. She works full-time at an insurance company, cares for her younger sister, and commutes each week from East Lyme to classes at UConn’s Avery Point and Hartford campuses. On top of that, she carries a full academic load while pursuing a bachelor’s degree in human development and family sciences.

Ebersole is among the many students mentored by Higher Edge, a New London-based nonprofit, dedicated to helping young people attend and graduate from college. Most of its students hail from Greater New London and Willimantic families striving to build their futures despite limited financial resources.

Executive Director Katie Hallisey explained that the organization was founded to guide “first gen” young people like Ebersole – the first in her family to attend college. These students face unique challenges – and, often, self-doubt – as they navigate the complex college process without a family member’s experience to guide them. Higher Edge steps in to bridge that gap.

Its support comes in many forms: encouragement, help filling out tedious financial aid forms, review of college essays, advice on securing letters of recommendation, tips on choosing an affordable college, guidance on finding scholarships and fee waivers. When an



unexpected bill threatens a student’s registration, mentors advocate for solutions.

“I try not to think about where I would be without Higher Edge,” Ebersole said, reflecting on her five-year mentee experience.

She received a Foundation scholarship from the Alfred G. and Imogen M. Moss

Scholarship Fund. And, since 2012, the Foundation’s grants to Higher Edge exceeded \$450,000.

“These students work so hard – they inspire and motivate us!” Hallisey remarked. “Maybe their path isn’t straightforward, but they don’t get deterred. It’s unbelievable sometimes.” ►

Photo: Lena Ebersole is on track to graduate in May 2025, and plans on a nursing career. | J. Koteen Photography



Published twice yearly, Compass Points aims to inform and engage our donors and community partners across Eastern Connecticut.



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CELEBRATING A CARING COMMUNITY

Today and every day, we celebrate a community where people care about each other. In these pages, you'll find stories of some of the many organizations and generous people who make Eastern Connecticut so special.

The Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut is privileged to introduce many caring people to one another. We keep a finger on the pulse of the community through regular contact with community leaders and elected officials. And, together with our partners, we identify solutions to local problems and connect donors to the groups on the ground that make a difference in people's lives.

Mentorship and support are critical for young people as they navigate life's challenges. We are proud to have been one of the first funders of Higher Edge and to introduce the organization to other supporters. Each year, its participants are among the many students who receive Community Foundation scholarships. Similarly, we learned from Thompson Ecumenical Empowerment Group (TEEG) about adolescents in the Northeast Corner who need connection, support and mentorship to stay on track. We shared this concern with a generous donor, who provided funding for TEEG mentors.

We have long supported sustainability and resiliency initiatives in Eastern Connecticut and are thrilled to have joined forces with the Interreligious Eco-Justice Network to advocate for clean energy options.

We firmly believe that access to music, arts and culture is a basic human right, so we were delighted when our friends at Musical Masterworks introduced us to Decoda. Now, their partnership with Waterford Country School brings musical joy and innovation to young people. Likewise, we provided a grant to the Public Library of New London to introduce children to science, technology, engineering, art and mathematics (STEAM) programs. Partnerships with strategic-minded donors like Kathy and Ted Parker make grants like these possible.

We thank all of you who live and work in our community and lend a helping hand. That is how we, as neighbors and as a region, thrive.

Be well,

Maryam Elahi
President & CEO



Three Questions for Groton's Kathy and Ted Parker, Founders of the Parker Family Fund

The Parkers established a donor-advised fund at the Community Foundation in 2021. They kindly shared their thoughts on giving.



Photo: Kathy and Ted Parker | J. Koteen Photography

❶ What compelled you to create the Parker Family Fund?

Ted: As an investment advisor, I have a professional interest in donor-advised funds. It's simple, it saves us taxes, and it allows us to support causes more effectively. We also think it's important to support the Community Foundation itself. It serves an important purpose.

Kathy: I served on the Foundation's Grants Committee — that's how I first got involved. It was fascinating. I got to learn so much about the wonderful network of organizations supporting our community. Ted and I recognize the expertise at the Foundation. They know what we are interested in supporting through our Fund, and they connect us to what the community needs.

❷ What causes are most meaningful to you?

Kathy: I spent two years of my childhood in Puerto Rico where I didn't speak Spanish. Now I'm very sympathetic to people who are new to a community. Immigrant causes are very important to me. And we believe strongly in treating people decently and giving them opportunities. We've been blessed with privilege, and we know not everyone starts in the same place.

Ted: Yes, we are fortunate to be able to "pay it forward." I really enjoy the environmental assets we have in the area; it's a beautiful place with many opportunities for recreation. We benefit from this preserved land, and stewarding nature is something we both support.

❸ What have you learned through your philanthropy?

Ted: As I work with people on their finances, charitable giving often comes up. Some of my clients are charitably inclined — it's a big part of their lives. Their generosity is so moving, and they're happy, contented people. They're a big inspiration for me.

Kathy: We enjoy being generous now, rather than waiting until after we're gone. It's nice to see the impact of our giving and to be able to celebrate with the organizations and people who are benefiting now. ▶

“Our congregation committed to reducing our carbon footprint and costs. Now, we’re saving money, which can go back into our mission.”



Interfaith Group Lights the Way to Climate Action

A professional opera singer might seem like an unlikely climate activist.

But on the day Terri Eickel decided to help mobilize faith communities for environmental justice, she wasn't thinking about activism — she was singing in a church choir. As the minister spoke of the urgent need to stop local power plants from polluting the air, especially in Connecticut's low-income cities and towns, something clicked.

Eickel got fired up. The rest is history.

She went on to co-found the Interreligious Eco-Justice Network (IREJN), based in Preston. It equips Connecticut congregations to lead the charge for

healthier, climate-friendly communities. The Community Foundation lends a hand with more than \$17,000 in grants.

Today, the Network brings together clergy from various faiths to advocate for clean energy policies. It hosts webinars on topics like reducing the impact of air pollution on asthma, and supports houses of worship in adopting environmentally-friendly practices.

The First Church Congregational in Willimantic is one shining success story. With guidance from the Network, the church secured utility rebates to install hundreds of energy-saving LED bulbs in its sanctuary, parish house, and offices. The project's original \$38,000 price tag would've been a non-starter, but thanks to rebates, the church paid a fraction of the cost.

Older buildings like First Church can be energy guzzlers. But Reverend Paul Doyle, the church's pastor, said,

“Our congregation committed to reducing our carbon footprint and costs. Now, we’re saving money, which can go back into our mission.”

So far, more than 200 Connecticut houses of worship have taken energy-efficient steps thanks to the Network's outreach. But to Terri Eickel, the most powerful impact may be the “ripple effect.”

“Faith communities are trusted voices,” she says. “When people see their church, synagogue, or mosque making changes to save energy, they feel motivated to do the same at home.” ►

Photo: Rev. Paul Doyle in the newly illuminated sanctuary of The First Congregational Church of Willimantic.
J. Koteen Photography

From Books to Bots, Library Delivers for New London Youth

Want to hear success stories from The Public Library of New London's STEAM after-school program? Executive Director Madhu Gupta can tell you plenty — while beaming with pride.

There's the robotics team that created a dancing robot, and the teen who designed a mini cardboard car powered by AA batteries. Another boy, after getting hooked on science activities at the library, announced he wanted to become an electrician. And parents raved about the STEAM kits the library sent home (several hundred per month!). The best part: kids spent more time with their families — and less time on screens! — exploring the activities.

Serving more than 27,000 people, the Library is a hub for more than just books. While some come to read, study, or do research, you'll also find the building buzzing with Zumba classes, board game nights, and more.

Yet, the staff noticed something else: a growing excitement for science. But many families couldn't afford tickets or lacked transportation to visit the local science-based attractions.

So, with a Community Foundation grant, the Library brought STEAM to them — by hosting local experts to lead activities. Curious little learners got hands-on activities led by the Mystic Aquarium, Mystic Seaport, and Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center. The Niantic Children's Museum and UConn's 4-H program introduced live animals. Cooking classes opened eyes to the science behind baking. The guest speaker events packed the room—often with entire families eager to learn.

"We are helping young people think about their futures," Gupta said. "They're so intrigued. And with our STEAM kits, families have all the supplies to keep the learning going at home."

It's full STEAM ahead for the library: drumming, coding workshops, and stargazing are coming soon! ▶

"We are helping young people think about their futures..."



Photos: Children and their parents enjoyed some sticky fun at The Public Library of New London's "Slime Night" to promote STEAM learning. | J. Koteen Photography

Where Mentors Bridge Distances for Rural Youth

Tucked into the scenic northeast corner of Connecticut, where country roads wind through historic former mill towns, you'll find the Thompson Ecumenical Empowerment Group (TEEG).

While the agency is a touchstone for residents to get early child care, food staples, and other essential services, TEEG is also an oasis for young people seeking connection.

Some stop in to meet with TEEG's mentors, volunteer in its community garden, or stock shelves in the food pantry. Others may get a ride from TEEG's youth advocates to the drama club at the theater in the next town, to the YMCA, or to a basketball clinic. Sometimes TEEG's youth advocates even transport students to school if absenteeism is becoming a problem. Like other rural areas, access to transportation is a constant challenge.

"Together, we give young people the support they need to believe in themselves and achieve."

"In these small towns where this is such physical disconnectedness, we see young people who think the universe may not hold much for them outside of their neighborhood," said Carl Asikainen, TEEG's executive director. "So, we have opportunities to broaden their horizons and give them a sense of what's possible."

And when young people make mistakes, TEEG and the Juvenile Review Board members work together to create a plan for the young person to get back on track — without becoming entangled in the legal system.

TEEG's advocates support the young person every step of the way, offering the agency as a space to serve out-of-school suspensions or complete community service requirements, get homework help,

and engage with positive role models who teach responsibility and empathy. Asikainen sums it all up: "Together, we give young people the support they need to believe in themselves and achieve." ►

Photos: A teen volunteer stocks TEEG's food pantry and accompanies Youth Advocate Meg Gohn to deliver soup to homebound people in the Thompson area. | J. Koteen Photography



A Harmonious Collaboration Hits the Right Notes

Imagine being a high school student and hearing world-class musicians perform the music you wrote — in one week.

More than 100 students at Fitch High School in Groton and Waterford Country School experienced that thrill thanks to Musical Masterworks' partnership with Decoda, an affiliate ensemble of Carnegie Hall. Over the course of a week, four professional Decoda musicians led residencies at both schools.

With feedback from the musicians, Fitch students studying advanced music composition discovered the musical possibilities of various instruments. And, encouraged to experiment and personalize their works, they learned to refine the messages they wanted to convey through music.

"It's rare for an early composition student to hear something they've written played by professional musicians," reported Mic Herring, executive director of Musical Masterworks, based in Old Lyme. "So, watching students hear their creations come to life in front of the community was amazing."

At Waterford, which serves students with specialized education needs, Decoda musicians were careful to build trust before guiding them through songwriting workshops.

By the end of the week, each young person had written a song which was performed by groups of students, accompanied by the Decoda musicians.

"You might see a kid barely engaging on Monday, and by Friday they're singing and dancing."

"The changes were remarkable, because the Decoda musicians have unbelievably gentle but effective ways of pushing kids out of their shells," Herring said. "You might see a kid barely engaging on Monday, and by Friday they're singing and dancing."

According to Herring, Decoda so inspired the Waterford School, it secured funding to expand its own music offerings.

"It speaks to the power of this kind of music program," Herring added. "There's so much pride in what they create together." ▶



Photos: Many Community Foundation donors support Musical Masterworks and Waterford Country School. And they made it possible for Decoda to perform two free community concerts, including one at Old Lyme Library.

Photos courtesy of Decoda

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Our New Look

For more than 40 years, the Community Foundation has partnered with nonprofit organizations and generous individuals to work toward a healthy, thriving, sustainable Eastern Connecticut. To advance that vision, we have increased our advocacy efforts to affect broader systems change.

Our new branding created by CO:LAB reflects this bold vision. The vivid color palette reflects our new initiatives and the dedicated nonprofits we support. The new logo emphasizes our name and pays homage to our heritage, with a reimagined version of the east-pointing compass representing our focus on the future of our region.

We are so grateful for your support, and we are thrilled to better communicate the inspiring collaborations that create a thriving Eastern Connecticut. ▶