



A Commitment to Growth: Johanna Irizarry's Leadership Journey

Johanna Irizarry has always had a passion for learning. Growing up in Puerto Rico, she sought out every opportunity to challenge herself. "I used to go with my mother to her college classes," Irizarry recalls. "I've always been a go-getter."

That drive carried her through one of the most difficult chapters of her life. In 2017, in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria and the devastating electrical blackout that followed, Irizarry made the difficult decision to leave Puerto Rico and start over. She came to Connecticut, where her sister was living, and has since made eastern Connecticut her home.

Today, Irizarry serves as Leadership Giving Manager at United Way of Southeastern Connecticut, where she helps strengthen community resources and support local needs. But even while building her career, her commitment to growth has never wavered.

This spring, Irizarry took another step forward when she participated in Harvard Business School's Advancing Women of Color in Leadership program, with support from the Ernest & Elizabeth Cone Scholarship through the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut. The intensive program brought together women leaders from around the world to explore



leadership challenges, innovation, and decision-making.

For Irizarry, the experience was both affirming and transformative. As a Latina woman navigating leadership spaces—often far from home and without a strong local cultural community—she says the opportunity helped her feel seen and empowered. It also reinforced the importance of using every available resource and embracing mistakes as part of growth.

Before joining United Way, Irizarry worked as a bilingual community support worker at Community Health Resources, where she first discovered her passion for resource development and social services. She describes this work as feeling like "running

a family"—a reflection of her deep care for community and connection.

Now, Irizarry is focused on sharing what she has learned with others. Inspired by her recent experiences, she is developing a free workshop in Spanish to expand access to leadership skills for other Spanish-speaking professionals.

"Leadership isn't just about personal success," says Irizarry, "It's about opening doors for others." And with every new challenge she embraces, she continues to do just that. ►

Photo: Johanna Irizarry poses with her certificate from Harvard Business School's Advancing Women of Color in Leadership program.





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Strong communities don't happen by chance.

They are built intentionally by people who invest their time, talents, and resources in one another.

Dear Friends,

As you read this month's newsletter, you'll notice a common thread: the power of opportunity. Each story reflects what is possible when people come together around a shared purpose.

And yet, many of our neighbors and nonprofit partners face growing challenges as federal funding cuts strain essential programs and services. The Community Foundation is committed to responding to these changing needs so people throughout Eastern Connecticut continue to have access to the resources they need to thrive.

Through transformational grants, we are making significant investments in healthcare, childcare, housing, and basic needs. We are proud to support organizations including Partnership for Strong Communities, Generations Family Health Center, United Community & Family Services, EASTCONN, LEARN, and others working to strengthen the systems and services our communities depend on.

The Foundation also plans to establish a scholarship fund to create more opportunities for our youth. This summer, our intern, Sofia D'Agostino, helped lay the groundwork by developing a database of past scholarship recipients who will play an important role in launching this initiative.

We are honored to partner with generous donors who make this work possible. Their philanthropy allows us to respond to immediate challenges while investing in the people, organizations, and ideas shaping Eastern Connecticut's future.

Every donor, volunteer, nonprofit partner, and community leader has a role in building that future. Together, we are creating communities where children can thrive, young people can discover their potential, families can access the support they need, and neighbors can remain informed, connected, and engaged.

Thank you for being part of this work.

With gratitude,

Maryam Elahi
President & CEO



The Lily Pad: Making a Splash in Early Learning

Every Wednesday, families stream into the Lily Pad Lending Library at Eastern Connecticut State University's Child and Family Development Resource Center, eager to discover new books, hands-on learning kits, and opportunities to learn together.

Since opening its doors earlier this year, the Lily Pad Lending Library has become a place where children and families can explore, ask questions, and discover just how exciting learning can be.

Made possible through support from the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut, the Lily Pad Lending Library and STEAM Outreach Program have transformed a once-underused campus space into a vibrant hub for literacy, creativity, and family engagement. Nearly 1,500 children's books, take-home STEAM kits, and family resources are now available at no cost, bringing high-quality educational experiences into homes throughout the Willimantic area.

"The funding allowed us to completely redo the space, expand it, modernize it, and make it accessible," said Niloufar Rezai, director of the Child and Family Development Resource Center. "Everything in the library has a purpose."

That purpose extends well beyond the shelves. Families can check out themed learning kits focused on science, cooking, music, yoga, and more, each carefully designed to support children's development through hands-on exploration. Interactive activities, such as family scavenger hunts, encourage caregivers to slow down, engage alongside their children, and make learning a shared experience.

The grant also supports immersive STEAM programming that brings experiences directly to children who might not otherwise have access to them. Live animal presentations, mobile science labs, drumming workshops, art experiences, and nature programs introduce children to new ideas while reinforcing literacy, critical thinking, and social-emotional development. For the more than 68% of children served by the center whose families meet the federal definition of poverty, these opportunities help broaden horizons and spark lifelong curiosity.

"Everything in the library has a purpose."
—Niloufar Rezai

Located on Eastern's campus, the center also serves as a laboratory school where faculty conduct research and future early childhood educators gain practical experience working alongside children and families. Together, these partnerships strengthen both today's learners and tomorrow's teachers—creating ripple effects that extend far beyond the classroom. ►

Photos: Young learners make bird feeders during a hands-on activity at ESCU's Lily Pad Lending Library and STEAM Outreach Program.



From Rookie Season to World Stage: Southeastern CT Robotics Team Heads to FIRST Championship

The latest cohort of students on a high school robotics team in Southeastern Connecticut is already making waves.

In their very first season, this newly formed group of student engineers accomplished what many teams spend years chasing: a spot at the FIRST World Championship.

Southeastern CT Robotics (SECTR) began the year with a big goal: to give local students hands-on access to STEM learning and real-world problem-solving. Just months later, that goal translated into an extraordinary achievement on the global stage.

"We are very excited and proud of our program," said coach Fini McGlinchey. "This success has blown us away!"

The FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) World Championship brings together top student robotics teams from around the world to compete, collaborate, and showcase their engineering skills. For a brand-new team, earning a spot is no small feat.

This spring, SECTR's team, 30393 Lumens Cubed, traveled to Houston, Texas, to represent Southeastern Connecticut in the FIRST Tech Challenge division. Out of 339 teams competing, only 17 were rookie teams—making SECTR's achievement even more impressive.

Behind the scenes, students spent months designing, building, and programming a competition-ready robot. As a new team without an existing inventory of parts, they had to think creatively—often designing and 3D-printing components themselves. Along the way, students developed skills far beyond engineering, including teamwork, communication, time management, and adaptability under pressure.

Robotics serves as an entry point into future education and careers in science, technology, engineering, and related fields.

Support from the Community Foundation helped make this opportunity possible. Funding contributed to essential resources such as equipment, materials, and team development, ensuring students in eastern Connecticut could access high-quality STEM experiences regardless of their background.

For many participants, robotics serves as an entry point into future education and careers in science, technology, engineering, and related fields. Programs like SECTR help spark that interest early, building confidence and opening doors for students across the region.

The team itself reflects the strength of that regional approach, bringing together students from Groton, Waterford, New London, Ledyard, and East Lyme. Many team members first discovered robotics through SECTR's middle school programs, which creates a strong pipeline of young engineers.

In just one season, this rookie team has shown what's possible when curiosity meets opportunity—and when young people are given the tools to succeed. ►

Photos: Top: SECTR's team, 30393 Lumens Cubed, poses for a photo at the World Championships in Houston, TX. Bottom: Members of SECTR's middle school program

Old Lyme Rowing Association: Building Confidence, Community, and Love for the Water

For generations, the Old Lyme Rowing Association (OLRA) has helped young people and adults discover the rewards of rowing while fostering confidence, leadership, and a lasting connection to the shoreline community.

Through its endowed fund at the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut, OLRA is ensuring this tradition continues for years to come.

Based on Rogers Lake in Old Lyme, OLRA's mission is to support junior rowing while creating opportunities for adults to continue the sport through its Masters program. The organization works in close partnership with Lyme-Old Lyme High School, where students can participate in the rowing program free of charge if they are Old Lyme residents. The relationship is uniquely collaborative: OLRA purchases equipment for the program and donates it to the school district, while the district maintains the Fred Emerson Boathouse, named for the local coach who championed rowing at Old Lyme High School and helped to establish rowing programs across the Northeast.

Today, more than 150 participants—from middle school students to adults—take part in OLRA's programs each year. While some athletes go on to compete at the highest levels, including Olympians Austin Hack and Liam Corrigan, OLRA leaders say the greatest victories often happen much closer to shore.

"Just this morning, one girl flipped her boat three times," recalls Director of Rowing Paul Fuchs. "She came back in excited and wanted to keep rowing. That's what keeps me going."

Those moments build far more than rowing skills. Participants develop resilience, teamwork, leadership, and responsibility while becoming comfortable and safe on the water—an especially valuable skill in a shoreline community. They also

experience what many rowers describe as the peaceful, almost meditative feeling of gliding across Rogers Lake, whether under bright sunshine or in the early morning fog.

The organization also brings together people from communities across the Connecticut shoreline. Juniors, parents, coaches, and master rowers learn from one another, volunteer together, and build friendships that extend well beyond the boathouse.

Rowers develop resilience, teamwork, leadership, and responsibility while becoming comfortable and safe on the water.

"As a parent, I love seeing the youth interact with the masters," says OLRA President Mayla Guidi. During a recent car wash fundraiser, adult rowers brought their cars for the juniors to wash—a simple tradition that, she says, "creates camaraderie and community, both on and off the water." ►

Photo: OLRA's Blood Street Sculls takes its name from the road where the boathouse is located and "sculling" (rowing with two oars).



LymeLine: Keeping Local Communities Connected Through Trusted Journalism

For more than two decades, LymeLine has been helping residents of Lyme and Old Lyme stay informed about the people, places, and decisions that shape their community.

Founded in 2003 by the late John “Jack” Turner, who believed the towns too often “got the short end of the news stick,” the independent online news outlet has become a trusted source for local news, events, and community perspectives.

Today, LymeLine operates as a nonprofit organization, continuing its mission to engage, inform, and connect residents through free, accessible journalism. Thanks in part to a grant from the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut, LymeLine is strengthening its ability to serve the community while

ensuring local news remains available to everyone—without a paywall.

“We are here to let people know what’s going on in their town,” says Executive Editor Elizabeth Regan. “What are elected officials doing? Where can people go and have a good time? We provide a forum for people to speak their minds and engage with their community.”

That commitment extends well beyond the biggest headlines. LymeLine regularly covers planning and zoning meetings, local government decisions, school activities, arts and cultural events, and community organizations. Whether reporting on new development proposals, summer concerts, or Boy Scout activities, the publication embraces the philosophy established by its founders: no story is too big or too small.

In an era when many local news outlets have disappeared, Regan believes community journalism plays an increasingly important role in civic engagement. By explaining how local government works and reporting on decisions that directly affect residents, LymeLine helps readers better understand—and participate in—the

democratic process. “Local government is where people can really make a difference,” she says.

“We are here to let people know what’s going on in their town.”

—Elizabeth Regan

Looking ahead, LymeLine is focused on building a sustainable future through nonprofit fundraising while continuing to expand opportunities for community participation. The organization already mentors aspiring journalists through a high school reporting program and summer college internships, and hopes to eventually grow its coverage into neighboring communities. For now, its priority remains clear: providing trusted, independent local journalism that keeps Lyme and Old Lyme residents informed, connected, and engaged. ►

Photo: Community members at Old Lyme’s America250 picnic in July. | James Meehan



BOARD MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: Morgan Tuck

Morgan Tuck serves as General Manager and Director of Franchise Development for the Connecticut Sun, where she oversees basketball operations and leads community engagement, youth basketball initiatives, and the organization’s social justice efforts.

A four-time NCAA National Champion at the University of Connecticut, Morgan has successfully transitioned from standout athlete to sports executive. She is passionate about empowering the next generation and is committed to creating opportunities for young people across Connecticut. Morgan previously served on the Community Foundation’s Fund for Racial Justice Committee and now brings that same dedication to her role as Secretary on the Board of Trustees.



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Matt Strekel, *Chief Development Officer*

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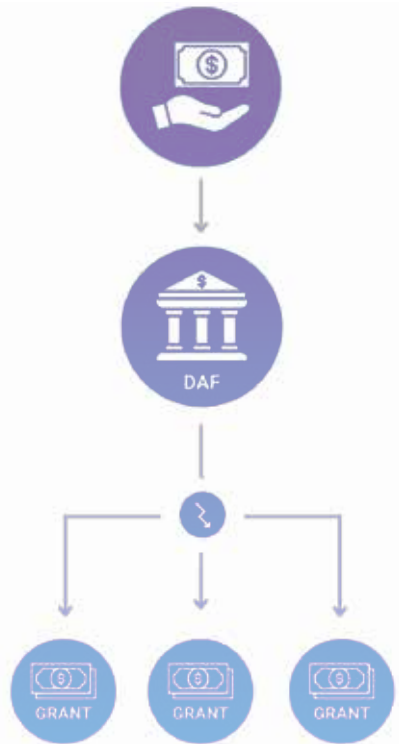
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We’re Here to Help

Whether you’re establishing a new fund or considering a transfer, we can help you create a meaningful giving plan built around your philanthropic goals and your vision for our community. To learn more, contact Lauren Parda or Geoff Taylor at development@cfect.org or 860.442.3572, or visit cfect.org/donors.



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