

# CONNECT

Fall/Winter 2020



## WELCOMING WEEK

Nayzeth Ybarra-Muniz (above) takes part in “Creating Home Together through Art” in Worthington, one of several events fostering a sense of belonging in communities.

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Thank you to our donors for investing in southwest Minnesota!

*Pages 10-11*



SOUTHWEST INITIATIVE  
FOUNDATION



# CARING FOR OUR NEIGHBORS

President/CEO Diana Anderson



Diana Anderson, President/CEO

I picked up a yard sign while attending Willmar's Creating Home Together through Art event. It was one of four community gatherings we sponsored this fall with Pioneer PBS to celebrate Welcoming Week and the benefits of creating safe, welcoming communities. Local volunteers, artists and organizations shared resources and led activities.

Willmar Interfaith Network is a collaborative network of faith leaders representing the diverse cultures and traditions that make up the community. Members create space for conversation and education, promote interfaith activities and build relationships across cultures. At the Welcoming Week event, they passed out signs that read, "We Are Better Together."

It's something that rural communities do very well: Come together in hard times.

COVID-19 has not impacted everyone equally. Lack of access to health care and safe and affordable housing are just two of the factors that put people at increased risk of getting sick and dying, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. We need to ensure people who have been adversely affected and those most at risk are supported to realize our vision of a southwest Minnesota where all people thrive.

We're seeing support through faith communities reaching out and offering hope. Local donors and community foundations providing generous financial support. Nonprofits and organizations stretching to meet needs. Schools and child

care providers putting our kids first. Employers taking care of their workforce. Healthcare and public health officials working to keep us healthy. Local governments transforming policies and practices to allow more innovation and inclusion.

There's more we can and must do.

Many messages are divisive and force us to pick a side. Southwest Initiative Foundation is focused on messages of unity and actions that show how we care for all our neighbors. We believe that dignity and belonging are core human values and that all people deserve the opportunity to reach their full potential. This is ingrained in my individual values, too. It's why I find ways to meet, understand and show care for my neighbors who call this region home.

Building vibrant, welcoming communities is one pillar of Grow Our Own, the work we've been doing for five years to help our next generation succeed. We are all struggling with the big conversations about what it means to be welcoming. We believe understanding how to be more inclusive in our daily lives is a great place to start. This issue features community-led work that we supported as part of our commitment to southwest Minnesota children and families. I'm optimistic that together, we can focus on the shared values that unite us. And optimism is a message we need right now.

CONNECT  
Fall/Winter 2020



CREATING  
HOME TOGETHER  
*through art*

Read a Welcoming Week  
recap at [swifoundation.org/  
welcoming2020](https://swifoundation.org/welcoming2020)

This fall, Southwest Initiative Foundation and Pioneer PBS sponsored Welcoming Week activities across southwest Minnesota with the theme "Creating Home Together through Art." Welcoming Week is an annual celebration established by Welcoming America, which launched in 2009 to lead a movement of inclusive communities becoming more prosperous by making everyone feel like they belong.

Share your story of belonging in Minnesota and what "home" means to you! Visit [pioneer.org/southwestminnesotastoryshare](https://pioneer.org/southwestminnesotastoryshare).

Clockwise from top left: Community members participated in "Creating Home Together through Art" at events in Granite Falls, Worthington, Morton and the Lower Sioux Indian Community, and Willmar. Photos by Jess Gorman, Anne O'Keefe-Jackson, Ivan Parga and Jennifer U'Ren.



See photos from Welcoming Week on page 3 and find out how to share your southwest Minnesota story.

CONNECTING TO NEW

# storytellers

IN SOUTHWEST MINNESOTA

*Andrea Duarte-Alonso joined the foundation in 2019 as part of a two-year Lead for America Fellowship. Based in her hometown of Worthington, she's worked to build bridges in the community and has used storytelling to help change the narrative of what rural America and rural Minnesota are like. Below is a reflection from Andrea.*

In my fellowship, I have the privilege to use my time to do work that is important to me. Within the last year I've expanded Stories from Unheard Voices, an oral-history project I started in 2016 that focuses on stories from first and second-generation immigrants in the southwest corner of the state. With the project, I have the honor of interviewing people, sitting with storytellers and getting to know their interests, struggles, and hopes for themselves, their children and their community. While some storytellers tell their immigrant story, others focus on telling a story from their youth and perhaps their upbringing in southwest

Minnesota. After interviewing, I spend a lot of time transcribing and reflecting on the voices I heard. You start to see similarities in the stories, and to see you're not in this alone.

At the beginning, I was mainly highlighting Worthington voices, but I know that immigrants and refugees also live in other communities in the region. To me it was important to have people documenting the stories of their very own neighbors. I wanted to share my storytelling skills with young people so that they too could document stories in their own communities. Thanks to a grant from the Women's Foundation of Minnesota, I am helping four young women expand their skills. Each will have the opportunity to do 3-4 interviews and get a sense of the people who live in their city and what it's like to be an immigrant and live in a rural, small hometown. **The power of story, when accurately represented, can bring about positive change in our beliefs, policies, and systems within our communities.** We also uplift people who haven't been given the mic before and



As part of her Lead for America Fellowship, Andrea Duarte-Alonso helped organize the 'Creating Home Together through Art' events across southwest Minnesota. She's pictured at the Welcoming Week event in Worthington.

they walk out of the interview feeling empowered, heard, and valued.

While storytelling is a great way to learn more about people, so are events that are intentional in building relationships. This fall, I helped organize the 'Creating Home Together through Art' event in Worthington. I partnered with the ARTmobile and local organizations that shared resources. Due to COVID-19, this event had to be planned safely, but we were successful in making it a time for people to go outside and engage with their dear neighbor through art, fostering crucial conversations about race and ethnicity, and exploring what makes a community welcoming. Many people who participated said we need more events like these. That to me was really powerful.

I know there is a lot more documenting, learning, engaging and healing that needs to be done with our neighbors, especially with our rural immigrant communities as they are often left behind and out of important conversations in our communities. I hope that with my time at Southwest Initiative Foundation and beyond, we continue to be a part of these important steps towards making our communities more welcoming and equitable.

## MEET ANDREA DUARTE-ALONSO

Andrea holds a bachelor's degree in political science, women's studies, and English from St. Catherine University. Her interests lie in journalism, story-telling, immigration law and politics. In 2016, she was selected as a Minnesota Jay and Rose Phillips Scholar and used the opportunity to create "Stories from Unheard Voices," a collection of first-person stories from Latinx immigrants and their children. She has been honored as a Harry S. Truman Scholar, recognizing her leadership, public service and academic achievement. Most recently, Andrea interned at the Obama Foundation in Washington D.C. with its International Team.







Sarah Swedburg, J. Pablo Obregón and Shelly Bormann, all of Willmar, participated in a year-long training that helps local government analyze policies and practices that create barriers to racial equity and explore how to remove them. The nonprofit Government Alliance on Race and Equity and the League of Minnesota Cities hosted the training, with support from Southwest Initiative Foundation.

## Understanding the role of local government in Racial Equity

Last year, Southwest Initiative Foundation (SWIF) recruited communities from our region to be part of a pilot program for advancing race equity. City administration, elected officials, educators and school staff and other community leaders took part in a year-long training that helped them analyze policies and practices that create barriers to racial equity and explore how to remove them.

The nonprofit Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) and the League of Minnesota Cities (LMC) started this program in 2016 to support cities in Minnesota, with teams or cohorts from local governments learning together. GARE is a national network of government working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all. And the LMC is a membership organization dedicated to helping cities throughout Minnesota build quality communities through effective advocacy, expert analysis, trusted guidance and collective action.

With SWIF's help, these partners modified their racial equity programming to offer cohort training to small and rural cities for the first time. Half of this pilot GARE cohort came from the southwest Minnesota communities of Luverne, Marshall, Pipestone and Willmar. Cities participating from other areas were Columbia Heights, Fairmont, Monticello and Shakopee.

"GARE and the League of Minnesota Cities wanted to build on the work they've done in urban settings and be more inclusive of Greater Minnesota," said J. Pablo Obregón, a member of the Willmar community and SWIF's Community Engagement Officer who has supported communities in the program and served as a liaison to GARE and LMC in delivering the program.

To accommodate the wide-ranging geography, the cohort met in person every other month at the Redwood Falls Community Center for facilitated learning and networking. In between, cohort members convened online for peer exchanges about racial equity action plans and strategies for increasing public support of racial equity.

"A lot of small cities, we really rely on each other. What works for you? How have you approached this issue? I think that cohort model works really well in a rural community," said Willmar City Planner Sarah Swedburg, who was part of a group of community leaders from our region that took part in the training.

Willmar has about 19,600 residents, with 21.2 percent identifying as persons of color and 78.8 percent identifying as white. Foreign-born residents make up about 16 percent of the community. Many racial and ethnic groups have shaped this community's story, beginning with the original Dakota inhabitants, then Swedish and Norwegian immigrants, followed by Latinx, Somali and Karen people.

Giving recognition to that full story is important in understanding equity, Sarah said. She highlighted how recent newcomers have contributed to the city's economic and overall growth, noting that the downtown deals with fewer vacant buildings than other communities of similar size. Ensuring Willmar's local government policies



*"Changing how cities function can sometimes feel very daunting, but it isn't as terrifying or as difficult as it can seem."*

**SARAH SWEDBURG**  
WILLMAR CITY PLANNER

and practices work the best they can for everyone supports that growth and development.

"Changing how cities function can sometimes feel very daunting, but it isn't as terrifying or as difficult as it can seem," Sarah said. "There's a pretty decent cross section of community members interested in advancing racial equity. Having that community buy in in any program a city does is really, really important."

Willmar's eight GARE participants included representatives from Ridgewater College, the city council, city staff and other community leaders like Shelly Bormann, workforce development manager





**“There have been a lot of seeds that have been planted, and people are starting to see some of the growth happening across our region.”**

**J. PABLO OBREGÓN**  
SWIF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT  
OFFICER

for Goodwill Easter Seals and chair of the Willmar Human Rights Commission.

“The GARE program was great. I highly recommend it for any community. They will give you the structure to help move you forward if you have a community that really wants to improve race relations,” Shelly said.

As the leaders from Willmar started to examine city policies with a race equity lens, they realized one place to improve would be zoning ordinances, which regulate land use within the city limits and include rules about what someone can have stored outside their house.

“I think zoning enforcement is a really interesting area to start to talk about racial equity. Zoning enforcement is 99 percent reactionary, which in itself is not equitable,” said Sarah, who oversees zoning enforcement in her position as city planner.

During the GARE training, facilitator Gordon F. Goodwin challenged participants to think about the goal of city policies.

“My goal for zoning enforcement is not to write everybody up. Our goal is to have property owners who understand how to take care of their external property, have a city that is attractive and have a city people want to live and work and play in. How do you build in the access and the understanding of those systems that isn’t penalizing people for leaving a mattress on their yard?” Sarah said.

Because of their participation in GARE, Sarah and others are reconsidering how to lead with education rather than enforcement, a conversation Sarah says is ongoing. And more race and equity conversations have been happening with city staff.

“The League of Minnesota Cities did a training with department heads in the city of Willmar. We kind of did a mini version of the GARE training. I thought it was fantastic, and I heard similar comments from some of the department heads afterward,” Shelly said.

Normalizing conversations about race is the starting point for organizing internal structures to support the work of institutional culture change and implementing new practices, procedures and policies using racial equity tools, all goals of GARE. The pilot GARE cohort for small and rural cities finished its training in December 2019 but work continues to move forward in the communities, with support from SWIF.

“I think it’s very beneficial to have Pablo as a SWIF



**“I THINK IT’S VERY BENEFICIAL TO HAVE PABLO AS A SWIF STAFF MEMBER ENGAGING WITH US AS WE’RE WORKING ON OUR PLAN, LETTING US KNOW ‘WINDOM IS DOING SOMETHING LIKE THIS, AND WORTHINGTON IS DOING SOMETHING LIKE THIS.’”**

**SHELLY BORMANN**  
WILLMAR HUMAN RIGHTS  
COMMISSION CHAIR

staff member engaging with us as we’re working on our plan, letting us know ‘Windom is doing something like this, and Worthington is doing something like this.’ That’s very beneficial, having those connections,” Shelly said.

“There have been a lot of seeds that have been planted, and people are starting to see some of the growth happening across our region,” Pablo said.



**If your community is interested in advancing racial equity in its local policies, we can help you start those conversations and connect you to the right resources to move forward.**

Contact us at [info@swifoundation.org](mailto:info@swifoundation.org).

## LEAGUE OF MINNESOTA CITIES (LMC)

The League of Minnesota Cities promotes excellence in local government through effective advocacy, expert analysis, and trusted guidance for all Minnesota cities. It is a membership organization that serves its more than 800 member cities through advocacy, education and training, policy development, risk management, and other services.

## GOVERNMENT ALLIANCE ON RACE AND EQUITY (GARE)

The Government Alliance on Race and Equity is a national network of government working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all. Within this network, governmental jurisdictions across the country are making a commitment to achieving racial equity, focusing on the power and influence of their own institutions and working in partnership with others.

## GOVERNMENT ALLIANCE ON RACE AND EQUITY LEARNING COHORTS

The LMC has partnered with GARE over the last several years to support cities in Minnesota in a cohort learning model. Teams or cohorts from local governments participated in year-long training programs with the goal of developing a race equity action plan to implement in the following year. Since 2016, approximately 35 cities in Minnesota have participated in formal GARE cohorts involving planning or implementation stages. Last year saw the launch of the Introductory Cohort for Small/Greater Minnesota Cities featured in this CONNECT story.

*There are thousands of people, businesses and organizations that give **THROUGH** us—to a community foundation, donor-advised fund, or another local fund. Then, there are those who give **TO** us. Those who support our mission to connect people, invest in ideas and build communities. Our work is not possible without the partners listed below, and we are grateful for their support during our Fiscal Year 2020.*

## Southwest Initiative Foundation General Endowment

Our general endowment fund is a cornerstone of who we are and what we can accomplish. We have been building it for 35 years to provide dependent, perpetual income that makes our work possible each and every year, regardless of challenging times we may face.

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## Growing Home Circle

Launched in 2004, our Growing Home Circle recognizes visionary donors elevating their annual support of our mission with a gift of \$1,000 or more to our General Endowment. With this history, Growing Home Circle member gifts made \$410,000 available in our current budget to breathe life into our mission. Our Fiscal Year 2020 members include:

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Thanks to our generous supporters, this year alone we awarded **1,077 grants totaling \$2,166,551** from all our funds to nonprofits and communities in our region and closed **134 new loans totaling \$4,278,525** to support businesses in southwest Minnesota.

Behind these numbers are incredible stories. SWIF Microenterprise loan client Nathalie Nkashama is using her grocery store on wheels to build bridges in Worthington.



In Atwater, Jane Hovey has relied on her 30-plus years of experience and help from a SWIF Emergency Child Care grant to weather the once-in-a-lifetime challenge COVID-19 has brought to her work as a child care provider.

Visit [swifoundation.org/2020impact](https://swifoundation.org/2020impact) to read these stories and see the impact donors helped make in our region.





**SOUTHWEST INITIATIVE  
FOUNDATION**

15 3rd Avenue NW  
Hutchinson, MN 55350



**BENSON AREA  
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION**

*An Affiliate of Southwest Initiative Foundation*

**QUICK THINKING FOR COVID-19 RESPONSE**

Sensing growing needs in the community as people were getting laid off and businesses were closing in April, our affiliate partner Benson Area Community Foundation worked quickly to distribute \$51,400 in local grants for COVID-19 relief in May. As the pandemic upended daily life in the region, we worked with our partners and friends to help southwest Minnesotans most affected by the crisis, including deploying \$3.4 million in four months. Our annual impact report has the stories behind the numbers.



Read more at:  
[swifoundation.org/2020impact](https://swifoundation.org/2020impact)

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