

CONNECT

Spring/Summer 2023



TEAMED UP FOR IMPACT

Our community impact team
can be a resource for you.

Page 4

Pictured: Southwest Initiative Foundation's community impact team includes (from left) Khou Lor, Nancy Fasching, Ivan Parga, Laura Curtiss, Than Than Kyaw and Amy Brustuen.



SOUTHWEST INITIATIVE
FOUNDATION

A REGIONAL ECONOMY THAT WORKS FOR ALL

Scott Marquardt

We've been deeply involved in the child care sector at Southwest Initiative Foundation, and the child care shortage is an issue that is always on my mind. This spring, more than 240 rural child care providers attended the sold-out Kids First Conference. Being in the room with these professionals affirmed why our work in this area is so important. I am grateful to our amazing conference partners at United Community Action Partnership, Prairie 5 Community Action Council, Southwest Minnesota Opportunity Council, and Child Care & Nutrition, Inc. for delivering this incredible event. Also, a shout-out to Jackpot Junction Casino Hotel, one of our Employer Resource Network® member employers, for being such an excellent event venue.

The conference included a full schedule of training, but it was also a chance to care for our caregivers—to build up these professionals who have the critical job of keeping our children safe and nurtured each day. They do it with limited resources and growing mental health challenges among both children and their at-home caregivers. Showing appreciation for these professionals is one of our key priorities at the foundation.

Access to child care is one of the top economic development issues in our region. Parents face long waiting lists to secure a child care spot, rely on friends and family, and may miss work when they don't have



consistent child care.

To keep our strong regional economy, it takes community-led solutions to the child care crisis. Southwest Initiative Foundation has been proudly supporting community planning, public policy, project investment and technical assistance, public relations and appreciation, and professional development.

Child and early care professionals are critical to economic mobility. They allow primary caregivers to work and support their families. They help children with learning and development of lifelong skills. They help ensure employers can attract and retain talent. They have a direct impact on the quality of life in our communities.

Child care is just one area of Southwest Initiative Foundation's work. I am committed to Grow Our Own, our strategy to ensure all

southwest Minnesota children and families can access opportunities. We need a regional economy that works for all, so that we have economic prosperity for all families.

I've called southwest Minnesota home for 23 years and am excited to see collaboration and innovation moving our communities forward. Our team will continue connecting people, investing in ideas and building communities. It's our mission, and we need you to keep making it happen.

Visit our website to read more about the Kids First Conference and how SWIF supports child care providers in our region.

swifoundation.org/kidsfirst2023



Baylie Kubesh gives Royce a lift at the Learning Funhouse child care in Bird Island. Our work in child care includes supporting early childhood professionals and child care providers like Baylie who have the critical job of keeping our children safe and nurtured each day.

New leadership

On Feb. 1, Scott Marquardt started his new role as president of Southwest Initiative Foundation, following a unanimous vote of approval by the foundation's Board of Directors. Scott has been at SWIF more than 15 years working in economic development.

“

“I look forward to working with our visionary board, our amazing staff, and our wonderful stakeholders and partners to advance economic mobility, foster vibrant and welcoming communities and invest in a region where all people can prosper,” Scott said.

Prior to joining SWIF, Scott was the City of Montevideo's Economic Development Director for nearly eight years. He has a background in public administration and is a Certified Economic Developer (CEcD) through the International Economic Development Council. SWIF's leadership transition comes with the retirement of long-time staff member and former President/CEO Diana Anderson in January.



Nancy Fasching and Khou Lor brainstorm together.

Teamed Up for Community IMPACT

We've been helping southwest Minnesota communities find what it means to thrive on their own terms for over 37 years. Responding to the increasing needs and requests from communities working to be places where all people feel welcome and like they belong, our community impact team has tripled in size.

SWIF Vice President of Community Impact Nancy Fasching leads this area of work focused on rural equity, youth and family, and civic and community engagement. It's ultimately about closing the opportunity gap for our kids by investing in the people and systems that surround them.

"Our goal is to deepen and build trusting relationships across differences by listening to, learning from, supporting, and advancing communities that have been excluded, to develop meaningful connections and real inclusion," Nancy said.

Meet the new community impact team at Southwest Initiative Foundation



Laura Curtiss

Laura provides day-to-day support and coordination for our grant program – the behind-the-scenes work to distribute grant dollars to communities. She joined the staff in 2020.

Laura processes grants for our 31 local community foundation affiliates, donor-advised and designated funds. Among those are hardship funds created by regional employers that support immediate needs and provide financial assistance to their team members and their families in the event of undue financial hardship as a result of certain crises and emergencies.

"Working on applications from our three crisis assistance funds has touched me the most," Laura said. "These applications remind me how important it is to spend my time with the people I care about the most."

Grants from the hardship funds have been used for unanticipated expenses that arise for things like funeral expenses, recovery from natural disasters, and personal tragedy. Last year, these hardship funds awarded \$95,145 to help fill immediate needs during times of crisis.

Laura is exploring how this opportunity can be more accessible for employees who are not native English speakers or who don't speak any English.



Khou Lor

As a first-generation Hmong immigrant, Khou's younger years were spent navigating systems and being the voice for her immigrant parents. Through these lived experiences, she realized her love for creating space for people to speak on behalf of themselves, in their truest form.

In her role at SWIF, Khou is a resource for communities across the region, while helping build and strengthen local Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) leaders and organizations in southwest Minnesota.

This spring, Khou launched Growing Local: Emerging Leaders, a new program that provides tools and resources for emerging leaders in partnership with University of Minnesota Extension.

"By participating in this program, my hope is that emerging leaders will be given that opportunity to shine and by shining, their communities will get to say, 'That leader came from my community!' I hope a new wave of leaders will bring energy to their communities," Khou said.

By nurturing these leaders, Khou says communities will be able to invite new perspectives, have boards and commissions that reflect their residents and build belonging in a community space.

The first cohort for Growing Local: Emerging Leaders was recently announced! Meet the 14 participants at swifoundation.org/growinglocal2023

Continued on page 6

Continued from page 5



Amy Brustuen

Amy is a resource to strengthen community connections and direct resources to opportunities that impact critical needs for the education and well-being of children birth-to-18 and families across the region. Her focus is on early childhood, youth mental health and holistic models of family care and support.

Recently Amy has been connecting with foundation grantees who are working on projects related to Grow Our Own, our strategy to ensure all southwest Minnesota kids can access what they need to succeed. As she learns more about their role, she's looking for other resources that can elevate their work in addition to funding.

"Communities need tools, and they need people who are able to step outside of 9-5 work schedules, Medicaid rules, social silos and so on. I am very privileged to be able to run between these spaces and sometimes to be able to connect social and financial capital from source to destination," said Amy, who has two decades of experience as a social worker.



Than Than Kyaw helps lead SWIF's work promoting welcoming and belonging.



Than Than Kyaw

Thanks to mentorship from his community's leaders, Than Than is passionate about supporting people and believing in their success stories. In previous roles, he has worked in community organizing, corporate community engagement, student services and community education. Than Than moved to Minnesota from a refugee camp in Thailand at age 11 and graduated from Worthington High School.

Than Than's role is identifying strengths and challenges, building community-based skills and being a resource to the region through community led partnerships, especially with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

"I'm connecting to people, listening to communities' stories to identify the challenges and strength each community has. I want to know the impact by the systems in their community like government, education, health care, economic development and more. May our work continue to support and help others access their own powers," Than Than said.

We were recently accepted to Welcoming America's Rural Welcoming Initiative along with 12 other rural communities. Than Than helps lead SWIF's work promoting welcoming and belonging, and through Rural Welcoming, he'll connect with and learn from our peers around the country as well as receive coaching and technical assistance on strategies to build belonging.



Ivan Parga

Based in his hometown of Worthington, Ivan is passionate about connecting to people, hearing their stories and taking steps to make sure those stories are validated and advocated for. He joined the foundation most recently, starting in December 2022. Ivan has experience in corporate community engagement and has been involved in local and electoral politics as well as various nonprofits and leadership projects including Be the Change and Voices for Racial Justice.

Day-to-day, Ivan is facilitating conversations and partnerships, offering guidance to community changemakers and creating new connections.

"Community members in southwest Minnesota come from all walks of life, and when we're intentional about connecting with them in a way that makes sense to them, their schedules, their family life, their values and interests, that's when we're most effective at making our communities more welcoming," Ivan said.

Along with others on the community impact team, he recently helped lead a series of focus groups with young people to broaden understanding of needs for training, professional development and talent retention in the area. Regional organizations involved in the partnership include Southwest Minnesota Private Industry Council, SWIF, Minnesota West Community and Technical College, United Community Action Partnership, Southwest Adult Basic Education, Southwest Regional Development

Commission and the Upper Minnesota Valley Regional Development Commission.

This effort is part of a wider program for cross-sector community groups across the U.S. to apply local solutions to increase opportunity and strengthen local economies.

"The more people we're able to get to the table, the clearer the picture is for making our communities healthy, vibrant, and thriving," Ivan said.

3 Steps to Making a Difference In Your Community

- 1. Contact us.** Email us at info@swifoundation.org to tell us more about your project or idea that will help your community thrive.
- 2. Let's partner.** Together, we'll find which program works best to support your goals or connect you to other resources.
- 3. Make a real impact.** Apply the ideas in your community to see what can happen next!

INVESTING TOGETHER TO BUILD STRONG COMMUNITIES

Kjersti Bastian has lived in Renville County most of her life and is proud to call southwest Minnesota home.

Kjersti is an executive administrative assistant at Renville County and lives in Fairfax with her husband, who farms nearby, and two young children. “Everyone knows everyone and cares about each other. Our communities are strong, but we recognize that we need younger families to move here. They’re our future,” Kjersti said.

At Southwest Initiative Foundation, we know supporting our neighbors, entrepreneurs, small business owners and main streets is vital to maintaining a thriving economy and providing opportunities for economic mobility for our kids and families. It’s what our communities want, too, which is why we invite local units of government to partner with us by investing in SWIF’s economic development work. The financial partnerships and collaborative funding efforts from cities, counties and economic development authorities provide critical resources that are invested back into our communities.

“There’s so much important work being done behind the scenes that many people don’t know about,” Kjersti said.

In the early years after SWIF and the five other Minnesota Initiative Foundations were

up and running, funders encouraged our board of directors to think about sustainability. After brainstorming and considering strong connection points, it was decided to approach local units of government.

Berdette Schoep was a board member from Clarkfield and interim executive director at SWIF when this strategy took shape.

“Our board decided to divide up the region by county, and we each started approaching city councils, businesses and individuals to start fundraising,” he said. “At that time, in southwest



Kjersti Bastian, Renville County Executive Administrative Assistant



Berdette Schoep speaks at a recent board reunion.

Since the first appropriation was made by the City of Pipestone in 1989, investments from local units of government total just over **\$3.2 million** to support economic development in our region.



Minnesota charitable giving from units of governments and corporations was a new concept. But we ended up being successful because it’s an easy sell. When you support SWIF, you’re giving to your community where you work, where your children are growing up and you’re going to age. There are immediate benefits, but it’s also like planting a tree. It’s an investment and the next generation benefits,” Berdette said.

Today, local units of government continue to partner with SWIF by investing in business and workforce development efforts. Since the first appropriation was made by the City of Pipestone in 1989, investments from local units of government total just over \$3.2 million to support economic development in our region. These dollars support people and projects that advance entrepreneurship, business retention and expansion, and the creation and retention of good jobs. We’ve leveraged these appropriations immediately and over time to make the dollars go even further, deploying \$56.6 million in loans and awarding \$50.3 million in grants since our founding.

Because city and county leaders partner with us, SWIF is able to support businesses and economic development through our Business Finance and Microenterprise Loan Programs, child care initiatives, workforce development, and more. Our work often intersects industries, county lines and communities, building bridges across our corner of the state.

Through his role at SWIF, Scott Marquardt sees how these partnerships are essential to leverage



Renville County Commissioners: Greg Snow, District 4; Doug Erickson, District 3; Randy Kramer, District 1; John Robinson, District 2; David Hamre, District 5.

Photo credit: Desiree Serbus Photography

resources, coordinate efforts, and build trust in rural and economic development.

“I am grateful for the collaboration, support, and investment from our local units of government and economic development organizations. These visionary leaders acknowledge the critical importance of regional collaboration to help ensure our businesses can attract and retain the talent they need in a post-pandemic economy, that our children and families can thrive, and that



In 2022, 17 counties and 38 cities supported Southwest Initiative’s economic development work with appropriations totaling just over **\$121,000**.

Continued on page 10

Continued from page 9



Lisa Herges, Renville County Administrator
Photo credit: Desiree Serbus Photography

all people who call southwest Minnesota home can achieve economic mobility,” Scott said.

A LONGSTANDING PARTNERSHIP

Renville County has been a longtime partner in SWIF’s economic development work with the county or their HRA/EDA contributing more than \$100,000 since 2003. In that time, the cities in the county have essentially matched that level of support in a collaborative effort to keep our economy and communities strong.

“Renville County is a special place. We are tight knit, and there’s a sense of community that you don’t get everywhere. You know your neighbors when you live in Renville County,” said Lisa Herges, Renville County

We are positioned to bring the right resources, people and inspiration together to ensure our region is a place where all people thrive. That includes small business owners, local volunteers and community leaders. Here are some of our other partnerships in Renville County.

Tony and Heidi Paskewitz opened **Prairie Meats livestock processing plant and meat market in Olivia** with help from around the region. Citizens Alliance Bank in Sacred Heart was the primary lender, along with Renville County Economic Development Authority, Olivia Economic Development Authority, Mid-Minnesota Development Commission and SWIF – plus an Agri Value-Added Equipment grant from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

Kathy Wehking of Hector currently serves on our Board of Directors. Kathy is a retired educator. She and her husband, Rich, own and operate a crop farm outside Hector.

Our team is currently working on child care initiatives in Renville County, including professional development support for child care professionals like the staff at **Little Stangs Learning Center in Buffalo Lake**.



Partners celebrate with Tony and Heidi Paskewitz at the ribbon cutting for their business in Olivia – Prairie Meats.



Staff from Little Stangs Learning Center in Buffalo Lake

Administrator. Lisa has been leading the county’s services and operations for nearly seven years and works closely with the Renville County Board of Commissioners.

She says the needs in the county are similar to many other rural communities: child care slots are hard to come by, the population is decreasing and businesses sometimes struggle to keep their doors open.

“We’re definitely focusing on these things. We’re committed to economic development and growth. We’re working hard, but we can’t fix everything. It’s nice to have partners who can step in and help when needed,” Lisa said.

Since inception, \$3.3 million has been deployed in Renville County through our loan programs, including 26 microloans totaling \$422,000 to small businesses. Through this program, SWIF provides customized technical assistance for the length of the loan to help clients improve their skills in financial management, operations, marketing and more. In addition to these investments, last year SWIF disbursed \$241,388 in grants directly impacting Renville County to support community projects, nonprofits, churches, government entities and schools.

Longtime leaders, like Renville County Commissioner Randy Kramer, recognize collaboration is crucial in rural areas. “SWIF helps put the pieces of the puzzle together when it comes to keeping southwest Minnesota and Renville County strong. We appreciate our partnership with SWIF and the work they’re doing to keep businesses in our communities,” Randy said.

You don’t have to be in local government to support this work! Make a gift in support of SWIF’s economic development program by visiting bit.ly/SWIFinvestingtogether.



BOLD Schools Kindergarten and First Grade classes were a recent recipient of grant funds for their ‘Science of Reading’ books.

Renville County is home to our affiliate partners the Bird Island-Olivia Community Foundation and the Morton Area Community Foundation and three local education funds under our umbrella– the Buffalo Lake-Hector-Stewart Public School Foundation, the Renville County West Public School Foundation and the St. Mary’s School Foundation. Collectively, they have disbursed more than \$450,000 in grants for community improvement, education and extracurriculars, town beautification and more.

Help respond to your town’s changing needs and opportunities by making a gift to your community foundation or another local fund. Visit swifoundation.org/donate to view the options.



An Affiliate of Southwest Initiative Foundation



An Affiliate of Southwest Initiative Foundation



**SOUTHWEST INITIATIVE
FOUNDATION**

15 3rd Avenue NW
Hutchinson, MN 55350



Initiators Fellowship

Enterprise for Good in **Greater Minnesota**

Apply for the Initiators Fellowship

Are you a social entrepreneur working to advance a social or environmental mission in southwest Minnesota? The Initiators Fellowship is a two-year program that provides wrap-around training, mentoring and guidance – plus an annual stipend – to support Fellows and their social enterprise ideas to improve Greater Minnesota communities. The application for the Fellowship is open from May 1 to June 15.

Take the eligibility quiz to see if you qualify at
fellows.greatermnnesota.net

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Chair

Patricia Dols

Vice Chair

Christie Rock Hantge

Past Chair

Randy Reinke

Secretary

Terry Gaalswyk, PhD

Treasurer

Dan Greve

Tom Brakke

Abdirizak Mahboub

Teresa Peterson

Erica Volkir

Kathy Wehking

Theresa Zaske

STAFF

Lori Anderson

Tiffany Barnard

Selina Berning

Amy Brustuen

Liz Cheney

Laura Curtiss

Nancy Fasching

Karen Grasmon

Nancy Kaping

Than Than Kyaw

Meghan Laffen

Karen Larson

Khou Lor

Missy Maiers

Scott Marquardt

Kim Morrow

Margie Nelsen

Ivan Parga

Jenelle Stiras

Jackie Turner

Jeffrey Vetsch

Amy Woitalewicz

Marie Zimmerman

Comments or change of address? Contact us!

Email us at info@swifoundation.org or call 800-594-9480.

15 3rd Avenue NW | Hutchinson, MN 55350 | www.swifoundation.org

(320) 587-4848 (local)

(800) 594-9480 (toll free)



Excellence. Accountability. Impact.™

Confirmed in Compliance with National Standards
for U.S. Community Foundations

An Equal Opportunity Provider and Employer