

# CONNECT

*Spring/Summer 2025*



## ◀ HOME GROWN LEADERS

This issue, we're highlighting diverse leadership paths to inspire and empower the next generation of community champions in southwest Minnesota.

Participants in our Growing Local: Emerging Leaders program gather at a session near Glencoe. Photo credit: University of Minnesota Extension



SOUTHWEST INITIATIVE  
FOUNDATION



When local leaders thrive, so do the communities they champion. By investing in the next generation of leaders, we empower individuals with the skills and confidence to address the unique challenges and opportunities facing our rural areas. These homegrown leaders understand the local context and are passionate about shaping a vibrant future for their communities.

From boardrooms to classrooms, local government offices to small town cafes, leaders make daily decisions that shape what southwest Minnesota will become. But what does it mean to be a leader? In this issue, we're highlighting a variety of paths people have taken; we hope their words will inspire you to take the next step on your leadership journey.

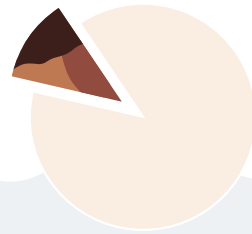


## Who Leads in Minnesota?

Minnesota Compass and the Bush Foundation teamed up to provide a holistic picture of institutional leadership in our state and how our institutions are developing the talent Minnesota needs.

12% ARE LEADERS OF COLOR

PEOPLE OF COLOR are underrepresented among Minnesota leaders across business, government, and nonprofit sectors.



1 IN 4 LEADERS ARE WOMEN



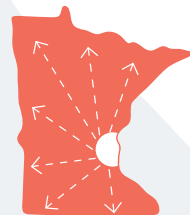
While half of Minnesota's adults are women, only 24% of leaders across the state are **WOMEN**.

22% OF GOVERNMENT LEADERS ARE 65+

About 1 in 5 government leaders are **OLDER ADULTS**, compared to 1 in 10 business and nonprofit leaders.



28.9% LIVE IN GREATER MINNESOTA



About a third of the state's residents are leaders living in **GREATER MINNESOTA**, while that area makes up 45% of the state's population.

Visit [mncompass.org/who-leads-mn](https://mncompass.org/who-leads-mn) for more on Who Leads in Minnesota.



# WHAT MAKES A LEADER?

In the face of challenges including addiction and incarceration, Mark Stewart has persevered. After suffering the loss of his partner, Taylor Joy, to mental illness, something clicked for him, and he has been relentlessly serving his community since then. With support from our Community Impact Team as well as his employer, faith community and friends, Mark has planned several inclusive community mental health events, helped start a suicide prevention coalition and launched the mental health nonprofit Unspoken Truth.

Mark works full-time job as a diesel mechanic at Tri State Truck Wash, where he says employer support has made it possible for him to start and grow Unspoken Truth.

Continued on page 4



Continued from page 3

## Following His Own Path to Leadership

A nontraditional leadership journey like Mark's has steep highs and lows. He has kept going through them all.

"My counselor she was awesome, and she always said, 'If you just take the next right step, life will untangle itself.' And it has. And that statement is so true. All you've got to do is take one next right step," Mark said.

Growing up in the Worthington community, Mark didn't picture himself as someone who has what it takes to be a leader. He dropped out of high school and spent time in prison. In fall 2022, Mark entered drug court on a 5th degree possession charge. The next year, his life changed in unexpected ways that would bring him to his knees and refine his sense of purpose.

On July 5, 2023, Mark's long-time partner Taylor Joy – the love of his life and the mother of their three children – died as the result of a mental health crisis. While Taylor was known for her contagious smile, she also struggled with mental health challenges over many years. In the wake of losing her, Mark channeled his energy into raising awareness of mental health resources. He had a lot of ideas but found it hard to gain momentum.

"It doesn't matter how good you do or how hard you fight; when it comes to your past, from small communities, it



Mark Stewart, Morgan Woodbury, Darren Lind, Dr. Joy Dawson, Arianna Santos and Amy Brustuen at Lighting of the Lanterns, hosted by Unspoken Truth and Creative Healing Space.

doesn't matter if you want to help people or not, you don't really get that chance because no one looks your way," Mark said.

## Finding Support and Taking the Next Step

A fellow mental health advocate, Suree Sompamitwong of Creative Healing Space in Worthington, helped Mark find the next right step, connecting him to Amy Brustuen at Southwest Initiative Foundation. Amy's role supports the growth and success of nonprofits with resources for training, leadership development and funding.

"Southwest Initiative Foundation has been behind me for everything and supported all of this. To even get me to a position to I feel like I can even do this and be on my own, it came from strength of that encouragement. I didn't know where to go. I didn't

know what to do. I had all these ideas, but I didn't believe in myself. I didn't feel like I had a voice. And little by little, Amy came and encouraged me, she listened and heard what I had to say, and then said, 'Let's accomplish this.' The support has been there ever since," Mark said.

It started in October 2023 with a Mental Health Awareness Lake Run-Walk in Worthington, just months after Taylor's passing.

"It really struck me how everything fell apart in July, and then by October, Mark had an event planned," Amy said.

## Establishing Unspoken Truth

Mark kept the work going and this year realized his goal of making Unspoken Truth a registered nonprofit, the name a nod to the thoughts, feelings and struggles often faced in silence.

Continued on page 6



### What does leadership mean to you?

A lot of people think leadership is winning the goal or being the number one person. To me, leadership is about being a part of a team, bringing community together ... not the one that stands out, but that one that stands together. Just like the captain of a football team, they want their teammates to do better as well.

### What advice would you give a leader who is just getting started?

Honestly, I would tell them not to compare themselves to other foundations or organizations or what others are doing but to remember why you wanted to do whatever it is in the first place, that passion. Do not worry if you're not as far as them or getting the same things that they are because you are right where you need to be and those things will present themselves when the time is right.



Continued from page 5

“Every time we hit a dead end when it came to Taylor’s mental health, it was always an insurance reason, or put on a waiting list, or transportation,” Mark said. “There was always something. And then when it came to me with recovery, same thing: Recovery is expensive, not only with transportation, but missing work for everything. I see all the money that a person has to spend. I want to be the one that can just say, ‘Hey, you know, you don’t ever have to worry with Unspoken Truth. You can come here, and we’ll find a way.’”

Unspoken Truth uses a Certified Peer Recovery Specialist (CPRS) model. Placed on a continuum of services, a CPRS falls between the role of recovery sponsor and substance use disorder or mental health counselors. A peer recovery specialist acts as a role model, mentor, advocate and motivator. So far, Unspoken Truth has two specialists certified.

“It’s building a solid relationship with them and just helping them along the way through their hurdles with our lived experience,” Mark said.

Ultimately, Mark’s goal is to be certified as a Peer

Recovery Specialist with an additional endorsement to serve in the criminal justice system, drawing on his incarceration experience to help others.

“I would love to meet them where they’re at, and offer something that I didn’t have,” said Mark, who graduated from drug court last year and now volunteers with the program.

Right now, Mark makes time for nonprofit work alongside his full-time job as a diesel mechanic at Tri State Truck Wash, where he says employer support has made it possible for him to start and grow Unspoken Truth.

## Making Space for New Leaders in Minnesota

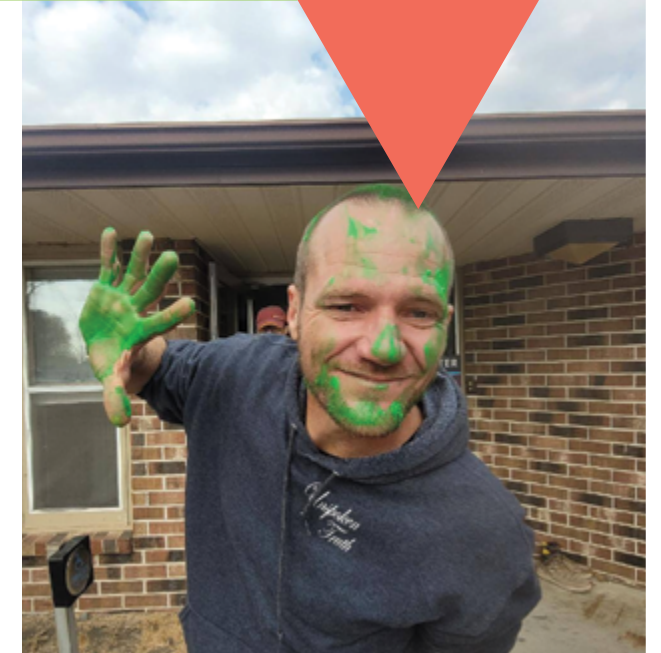
Dropping out of high school and later earning his GED puts Mark well in the minority of nonprofit leaders in Minnesota, where more than 90 percent have a bachelor’s degree or higher, according to

Who Leads in Minnesota, a project of Minnesota Compass and the Bush Foundation. But education does not define anyone’s full potential.

“One of the things I love most about Mark’s story is how he busted through the things that others might think of as barriers – and how this could potentially inspire people who want to do something but think they can’t,” Amy said. “The point of all of this is to keep your eyes open for the next leader in our communities; it doesn’t cost us anything to hear someone out, and sometimes we take a chance on people. The bottom line is the power of community. The community of support is an integral part of this story, and it makes all the difference.”

What makes a leader in Mark’s eyes is not that they have followers, but that they encourage more leaders.

“A lot of people think leadership is winning the goal or being the number one person,” Mark said. “To me, leadership is about being a part of a team, bringing community together ... not the one that stands out, but that one that stands together. Just like the captain of a football team, they want their teammates to do better as well.”



Strong nonprofits are essential to a thriving region, and Southwest Initiative Foundation supports the growth and success of nonprofits with resources for training, leadership development. Southwest Minnesota nonprofits are eligible for tuition assistance to attend training hosted by Propel Nonprofits through a new partnership. This professional development opportunity is open to staff, board members and committee volunteers.

To find out more, visit [swifoundation.org/nonprofits](http://swifoundation.org/nonprofits)

BELOW: Mark Stewart with Muhannah Kakish snap a photo together at the Lighting of the Lanterns, a community event supporting mental health.



BELOW: A group photo from the Healing is Living 3K Walk that Unspoken Truth hosted with community partners.





# Laura Curtiss

Hutchinson



Laura Curtiss wears many hats in life. She serves as our Grants and Operations Assistant in addition to being a devoted mom, a supportive sister, a grateful daughter, an enthusiastic follower and an ambitious dreamer. Each of these roles allows her to demonstrate leadership in unique and meaningful ways. Laura is also part of the current cohort of McLeod For Tomorrow's leadership program.

## What motivates you to overcome challenges in your leadership journey?

I constantly face obstacles, including language barriers that sometimes prevent me from fully expressing my thoughts and feelings, as well as cultural differences that can create a sense of isolation. Additionally, I struggle with my own fears and biases, which can hinder my ability to embrace new opportunities and experiences. Despite these challenges, I remain committed to overcoming them, as I want to show my children the importance of perseverance and the pursuit of one's dreams. My primary motivation in life is my children; they are the driving force that inspires me to rise each morning, even on days when I feel exhausted or lack the usual spark of motivation.

## What advice would you give a leader who is just getting started?

Embrace the opportunity to make mistakes, as it's a natural part of being human. Strive to do your best each day but

also practice self-compassion and avoid being too hard on yourself. Celebrate every achievement, even if no one is watching. Take pride in your successes without diminishing others and always remember to treat others as you wish to be treated.

## How has McLeod For Tomorrow helped you grow as a leader?

Participating in McLeod for Tomorrow has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. Through this program, I have not only learned to believe in myself but have also come to understand that we all possess leadership qualities in various ways. Engaging with different communities has broadened my perspective and allowed me to appreciate the diverse experiences and challenges that others face. It has been inspiring to learn from fellow participants and mentors, each with their unique stories and insights. This journey has reinforced the idea that leadership is not limited to formal roles; it manifests in everyday actions and interactions.



# Brad Gruhot

Marshall

I'm a big believer in leadership programs. We have Marshall Leadership Academy. It's in its nineteenth year now. It was in place from 1998 to 2013, then it was on hiatus until fall 2021. We've had full cohorts of 25 people ever since we restarted it. People love it. They like the opportunities. We also have Women's Connect and monthly Area Young Professionals with speakers, tours and that sort of thing.

## What advice would you give a leader who is just getting started?

If somebody is in a leadership role, you're going to get asked to do a lot of different things. Don't say yes to everything. How's it going to impact you? Is it the right organization to get involved with? What's the best fit for you? You have to be able to have a solid work/life balance.

## Leaders are generous people in many ways, including sometimes as donors. What inspires your giving?

I'm a donor because I know it goes toward great things that I work on as a daily basis, toward community projects that make an impact on the Marshall area. That goes a long way because I know that's going to improve Marshall and that's going to make Marshall more attractive. Our biggest challenge right now is our workforce. We are trying to keep our grads here, our Southwest Minnesota State University grads, our Marshall High School grads. We aren't doing it alone; we have amazing partners.

Brad is a husband, dad, "Chamber guy," sports lover and a volunteer. He's been with the Marshall Area Chamber for nearly 11 years and is involved in Business Development, Ambassadors and Transportation & Legislative Committees as well as overseeing daily chamber operations. Brad and his wife, Karen, live in Marshall with their two children. Gruhots are donors to the Southwest Initiative Foundation and our partner the Marshall Area Community Foundation.

## What does leadership mean to you?

Leadership means being a member of the community who wants to make change. It's also being a good role model to our staff and to our family, not being afraid to do the little things that make a big impact. And being visible in the community, getting out and just meeting people. When somebody moves to town, I like to see what they want to get involved with.



# Petra Jimenez

Fulda

Petra has lived most of her life in southwest Minnesota and makes her home in Fulda. A graduate of our latest Growing Local: Emerging Leaders cohort, Petra plans to run for the local school board next year. Last year, she organized the first Welcoming Week celebration in Fulda to help build belonging. Petra is a proud parent of four children and works for Worthington District 518 Community Education in adult education.

## How did Growing Local help you in your leadership journey?

Leadership, before, I think was scary to me. I don't see myself so much as a leader as much as I see myself as somebody who works in the background. I'm more comfortable doing that. The more you can learn, that takes away the fear, so you kind of know what you're doing. Going through Growing Local: Emerging Leaders and learning more about different leadership styles, communication, all those things, was really

helpful. I learned a lot about different ways of communicating, and I came to work the next day, and I used it right away.

I've been on quite a few boards before for places where I'd volunteered or knew somebody, and now I wanted to be more intentional with the boards that I'm going to be on. I really would like to be on the school board and wanted to know how that all works before getting more involved.

## What advice would you give a leader who is just getting started?

I think in your leadership journey, if there are points where it's harder to keep pursuing opportunities or feeling like you're going in the right direction, take a step back and evaluate

the whole picture and what the goal is and if it needs to be adjusted. Sometimes you get focused on the day-to-day things.

## Why did you want to bring Welcoming Week to Fulda?

I love Fulda. I live there, and we were welcomed when we first came. I just don't see too many more families moving in and staying. They move there, but they don't stay, so having something like Welcoming Week is really helpful to welcome those new families and let them know what our resources are. Because in a small community, people just kind of know through word of mouth.

## What are your future goals for your community and your role within it?

I am going back to school to be an EL [English Language] teacher and hopefully someday work in the Worthington school district or in Fulda. When we first moved here, Worthington didn't really have an EL program, and they would pull the students who they thought knew more Spanish out of classrooms to help with the newcomers. And so, I did that for a while, when I was really young, in like second and third grade. And that was really fun, and ever since then I thought that would be a cool job. Now there's a lot of assistance, there's a teacher pathway program, and there's a lot of support. I think it's the right time to do something like that.

## About Growing Local

*Growing Local: Emerging Leaders is leadership training designed to help up-and-coming leaders discover and build on their unique strengths so they can make a difference through local boards, commissions and elected positions.*

Southwest Initiative Foundation Rural Equity Specialist Khou Lor launched this program in 2023 and serves as its coordinator. Over eight months, the leaders explored strengths, emotional intelligence, navigating conflict, community and culture, followership and even Robert's Rules of Order for conducting meetings and making decisions as a group. Guest speakers included employers, entrepreneurs, community activists, local government officials and nonprofit leaders.

This year's Growing Local: Emerging Leaders cohort launches in May. Visit our website to subscribe to our e-newsletter and get the announcement of this year's participants, plus other foundation updates.





**SOUTHWEST INITIATIVE  
FOUNDATION**

15 3rd Avenue NW  
Hutchinson, MN 55350

# Are you an entrepreneur with a social enterprise idea?



## Initiators Fellowship

Enterprise for Good in Greater Minnesota

Are you an entrepreneur with a passion for tackling social or environmental challenges in southwest Minnesota? The Initiators Fellowship is here to support you! Designed for idea- and early-stage entrepreneurs, this fellowship helps foster the development of social enterprises. Become a Fellow and transform your vision into a scalable, sustainable venture that diversifies and enriches southwest Minnesota. Applications open May 1.

Visit [fellows.greaterminnesota.net](http://fellows.greaterminnesota.net)

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

### Chair

Christie Hantge

### Vice Chair

Dan Greve

### Secretary

Terry Gaalswyk, PhD

### Treasurer

Tom Brakke

Erica Volkir

Theresa Zaske

## STAFF

Lori Anderson

Tiffany Barnard

Selina Berning

Amy Brustuen

Laura Curtiss

Nancy Fasching

Nancy Kaping

Than Than Kyaw

Meghan Laffen

Karen Larson

Khou Lor

Missy Maiers

Johanna Markgraf

Scott Marquardt

Claire Meyers

Kim Morrow

Briana Mumme

Margie Nelsen

Ivan Parga

Jenelle Stiras

Jeffrey Vetsch

Amy Woitalewicz

Marie Zimmerman

Comments or change of address? Contact us!

Email us at [info@swifoundation.org](mailto:info@swifoundation.org) or call 800-594-9480.

15 3rd Avenue NW | Hutchinson, MN 55350 | [www.swifoundation.org](http://www.swifoundation.org)

(320) 587-4848 (local)

(800) 594-9480 (toll free)

**CFNS**

ACCREDITED  
FOUNDATION

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

An Equal Opportunity Provider and Employer