THE DEFROST PROJECT

Milan Community Foundation grant helps freeze time and thaw connections.

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Writing Southwest Minnesota's Success Story

Celebrating 35 Years

Pictured: Judi stops at the park on her way to the time capsule open house in Milan as part of The Defrost Project.
One of the people I admire is John A. Powell. He grew up in Detroit, Michigan as the sixth of nine children, played basketball and ran track in high school, and ran track in college. He is a traveler, author, speaker, professor and the director of the Othering and Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley. Southwest Initiative Foundation believes that dignity and belonging are core human values, and John’s work really aligns with this belief.

In an interview, he said, “The human condition is one about belonging. We simply cannot thrive unless we are in relationship.”

Southwest Initiative Foundation has formed incredible relationships over the last 35 years. The work has changed over decades as we flex, innovate and become what our communities and region need us to be. We’ve seen this as programs sunset, new initiatives take off, and challenges rise up and change our way of thinking and doing our work day-to-day. We need what each person brings to the table, what you have to offer. You are what makes this a special place to belong. Our relationships are something we’re celebrating as we mark our 35th anniversary this year. They’re also what’s leading us forward, into what’s next. Forged in an economic crisis, we’ve collaborated with businesses since the beginning. Those relationships paved the way for a new program we’re introducing to our region – and the state! The new Southwest Initiative Employer Resource Network® matches both short- and long-term economic development strategies for our communities, businesses, families and kids from cradle to career. You can read more about it in this issue of CONNECT.

Some of our closest relationships in the region are with our affiliate partners. I was lucky to help launch that program when I started at SWIF, and this year many of our affiliates had key milestones. The Hutchinson Area Community Foundation endowment reached $1 million, a permanent resource for the benefit of community. The Madison Community Foundation marked its 20th anniversary, with grants totaling more than $625,000 invested across the community. After four years of fundraising and construction, the Darwin Community Legacy Foundation dedicated the Darwin Veterans Memorial this fall in partnership with local community organizations. And in this issue, you’ll find a feature about our partner the Milan Community Foundation and its creative efforts to engage our kids in community building. Hats off to all our volunteer advisory board members for their leadership in the region!

As I thought about becoming a part of Southwest Initiative Foundation more than 20 years ago, I knew it was the right fit when the complexity of all that SWIF does didn’t feel complex to me at all. In my mind, the work that we do is all connected by the underlying concepts of asset building and leadership development. Thanks for being part of this important work, and for being in relationship with SWIF. We’re looking forward to year 36 with you!

President/CEO Diana Anderson

A 35-YEAR RELATIONSHIP

You have no idea the impact YOU’RE CURRENTLY MAKING

“At the first loan signing 35 years ago, did the people at the table have any idea where the foundation would lead? That the decades following would see more than $97.8 million distributed through our grantmaking and business finance programs.

When Josh Shipp spoke at the ‘Power of One’ forum hosted earlier this year by Southwest Initiative Foundation, he encouraged caring adults to have hope in the future and not to judge in real time what history would prove over time. We rely on that mindset at the foundation. We think long-term with an unwavering, multi-generational commitment to the communities where we work. Achieving lasting outcomes spans generations.

Josh Shipp

We’ve added many new initiatives in the past 35 years, like Welcoming Week. Celebrations across the region this year helped build belonging to support vibrant, welcoming communities our kids need to succeed. In Glencoe, kids lined up to take a swing at piñatas.

“Oftentimes one of the most difficult things about being a parent, a teacher or a caring adult is this nagging fear that maybe you’re not making a difference. Listen to me: You have no idea the impact you’re making right now.”

Josh Shipp

One of the first ways Southwest Initiative Foundation made an impact in the region when it launched was through lending, which we still do today. Pictured is a loan closing from our early days.

We’ve been through tough times before. Challenges in our relationships, our economy and our communities may make us feel like what we have isn’t enough and what we’re doing won’t take us where we want to go. Our 35th anniversary reminds us to be patient and dedicated in our work to unlock the potential that lives here.

Have hope. You may have no idea the impact you’re currently making, but in another 35 years we’ll look back and see how far we’ve come together.
With a grant from Milan Community Foundation – one of Southwest Initiative Foundation’s 30 affiliate partners – the artists returned this year to guide community members in exploring what it means to live in Milan, investigating what challenges Milan faces and imagining possible solutions.

“I think art gives us language and a way in [that] we don’t use every day. It opens up responses, questions, thoughts,” Sarah said, adding that it’s full of joy and play while also building critical thinking skills and helping us envision what isn’t already known.

**FREEZING TIME, THAWING CONNECTIONS**

In 2019, a group of four artists spent three days in Milan as part of a series of workshops in small towns across Minnesota. Artists Amanda Fredrickson, Meghan Grover, Amelia Hefferon and Sarah Meister met at grad school in New York and created The Defrost Project, using theater and storytelling to cultivate connection, explore local issues and celebrate rural communities.

The self-proclaimed Norwegian capital of the United States, Milan is a small town with a vibrant community fabric. Its Scandinavian roots are planted beside a community of newcomers from the Federated States of Micronesia who began arriving 20 years ago. Now half the town’s 428 residents are native Pacific Islanders or their children. Micronesia is a region between the Philippines and Hawaii that encompasses more than 2,000 islands. Milan’s Micronesians come from the island of Romanum in Chuuk State.

Galeasa Elias is a ninth grader at Lac qui Parle Valley High School and lives in Milan. The Defrost Project gave her a chance to be with her friends and work together.

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Being apart during the pandemic was hard for Galeasa, who was happy to come together with her friends for two weeks in August with The Defrost Project.

“I’m just happy to have everyone here and together, especially after the COVID stuff,” Galeasa said. “Being with everyone and working on these projects was my favorite part.”

What was meant to be a three-week project became a year of virtual programming due to the pandemic, with a finale in person.

In August, Amanda, Meghan, Amelia and Sarah came to Milan to join with local organizations in hosting events, workshops and celebrations around town.

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Grow Our Own Opportunity Grant funds Milan Youth Center

In 2016, Southwest Initiative Foundation launched a 10-year commitment to “Grow Our Own,” closing the opportunity gap for our kids and their families. Shortly after, we opened a special Grow Our Own Opportunity Grant for our community foundation affiliates. In 2017, Milan Community Foundation and the Greater Milan Initiative Project applied for funding to start the Milan Youth Center. The Greater Milan Initiative was formed in 2007 and purchased the former Milan school building to create a community center.

“Since many of the youth living in and around Milan are living in two worlds, so to speak, they serve as excellent ‘bridges’ within our community, reaffirming Milan’s long history of support for education and families knowing that children are our future. We want to give them every possible opportunity to succeed,” said Ann Thompson, who leads the Greater Milan Initiative.

The project received a Grow Our Own Opportunity Grant and has since offered programs to enhance youth success in education and provide them with life enrichment activities. The Milan Youth Center was a major partner in The Defrost Project activities and continues to give our kids support and opportunities to reach their full potential.

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asked the kids what forms of art they found interesting, and many said architecture. The project focused on places that are important now and what spaces there could be in the future. There was movie night in the park, a special 4-H Summer Camp, an interactive play open to all ages called “Time Warp” and a celebration with a time capsule open house.

For the community time capsule, Galeasa brought a necklace that reminds her of her grandma, who passed away, and a flower that reminds her of the blooms in her tropical homeland. They lay on tables next to a quart of homemade pickles, a roll of toilet paper, cloth face masks, a swimsuit and more contributed by community members.

In the time capsule, kids recorded their hopes for the future. Some things they want to see change are bullying and racism and garbage in the park. In contrast, they hope the trees and nature, the people and volleyball matches can be found in the Milan of the future.

“We need to learn how to take care of people better,” said Galeasa, who also helped create a mural for the project that depicts the “sharks and islands” in life – what the kids feel afraid of, and the places they feel comfortable.

Ann Thompson grew up in Milan, in a house across the street from the park that’s still a social hub. The fourth generation of her family to call Milan home, Ann owns Billy Maple Tree’s Gift Shop downtown. She’s a local 4-H volunteer, an ESL teacher, board member of the Milan Community Foundation and head of the Greater Milan Initiative. Four years ago, the Greater Milan Initiative received a grant from Southwest Initiative Foundation to start a youth center for kids in grades 7 through 12. Ann is the adult guide and played a major role in The Defrost Project.

“I feel really lucky that I know a lot of the kids and they trust me,” Ann said. “Whatever I can do to help make kids’ lives better I will do it. If you’re an immigrant, there’s all these obstacles to navigate. These kids are navigating two cultures. They want to fit in, and they want to make their families happy. It can’t be easy.”

The Milan Youth Center and The Defrost Project came together for a two-day virtual spring break camp earlier this year. They talked a lot about COVID and the shutdown, about what it meant, what they were missing and what they were looking forward to when things opened up again. Then, the kids paired up and took photos of places where they liked or felt safe or relaxed. And they interviewed kids and adults around town about what it means to live in Milan, what they like and what they want to see change. The ideas and voices from the video fit together in a poem for the future, part of the project that froze time in this town, and thawed connections.

“You should be proud of where you live. Living in a rural area doesn’t mean you’re settling for something less,” Ann said.

Ann Thompson (right) and J-son are on their way to the time capsule open house in Milan as part of The Defrost Project.

Check out our open Grow Our Own grant round at swifoundation.org/grants. Applications due by Dec. 6.
The Success Coach assists with a wide range of challenges and opportunities—both work-related and personal, which can include:

- Accessing child care
- Dealing with financial pressures
- Budgeting, banking or building a credit score
- Affordable housing options
- Transportation and car repairs
- Applying for other programs
- Locating counseling
- Managing conflicts with family/co-workers
- Training, education or career advancement

Together, the Success Coach and employees set goals, access resources and explore supports that will help them excel at work and beyond.

**A PERFECT MATCH FOR GROW OUR OWN**

ERNs match both short- and long-term economic development strategies for our communities, businesses, families and kids—from cradle to career. The model is a great fit for Grow Our Own, our work to ensure that all southwest Minnesota kids can access the opportunities they need to reach their full potential.

We know that one of the things kids need to succeed is stable families and parenting. Through ERNs, workers gain economic self-sufficiency and build wealth for themselves and their families. They also can access the supports they need to provide safe, nurturing environments for the kids in their lives.

Career on-ramps are another key to our kids’ success. ERNs help our southwest Minnesota employers develop and retain talent, ensuring we’ll continue to have strong regional businesses as young people prepare for and enter the workforce.

**SOUTHWEST INITIATIVE EMPLOYER RESOURCE NETWORK®**

**HOW IT WORKS**

The Southwest Initiative Employer Resource Network® member companies include Bethesda - with locations in Willmar, Olivia and New London; Minnesota Rubber & Plastics and Towmaster Trailers and Truck Equipment located in Litchfield; Jackpot Junction Casino & Hotel part of the Lower Sioux Indian Community; and Jonti-Craft in Wabasso.

Member companies pay for access to an on-site network Success Coach who works directly with employees as a coach, advocate and connector. Nationwide, member companies average a 500 percent return on their investment based on job turnover rates, the cost of skill building and training and increased productivity.
Wayne and Dorine Brock
Shirley Bowen
Greg and Carol Bossuyt
Rhonda Bonnstetter
Dr. Thomas G. Birkey and Mike and Jean Belinsky
Terri and Kent Bargfrede
Perry and Marquita Banks
Doug and Sharon Bakker
Steve and Phyllis Bailey
Aveyron Homes
Cheryl Avenel-Navara
Ruth Ascher
Lori Anderson
Garrett and Krista Anderson In Honor of: Lloyd Broderius
In Memory of: Greg Jodzio
Anonymous Gifts
income that makes our work possible year after year, regardless of challenging times we may face.

Southwest Initiative Foundation General Endowment
Our general endowment fund is a cornerstone of who we are and what we can accomplish together; through the power of collective generosity! We have been building it for 35 years to provide perpetual, permanent income that makes our work possible year after year, regardless of challenging times we may face.
Growing Home Circle

Our Growing Home Circle members are critical partners in bringing our mission to life. The Growing Home Circle is a way to recognize visionary donors elevating their annual support, and these members supported SWIF with a gift of $1,000 or more. These gifts position us to do more and be better.

John and Diana Anderson
Tiffany and Blake Barnard
Family
Tom and Sue Brakke
Thomas “Buzz” Burich
Carr Family Foundation
Catholic Area Faith Community of Jesus Our Living Water
Matt and Liz Cheney
Citizens Bancshares of Hutchinson, Inc.
Compeer Financial
Tim and Connie Connell
Tom and Barb Daggett
John and Tracy Dammermann
Robert and Patti Dols
Jeff and LeeAnn Ettinger
Family and Friends In Memory of: Greg Jodzio
Nancy and Marc Fasching
Federated Rural Electric
Norman and Ethelyn Fey
Frank J. Zaher Charitable Trust
Dr. Wayne and Karen Freese
Avis Freitag
Gary and Nancy Geiger
Walter and Rosanna Gilson
Affordable Partners Fund - A Partner Fund of the Initiative Foundation
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K.A.H.R. Foundation
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CELEBRATING THE LIFE OF OUR COLLEAGUE AND FRIEND

Greg Jodzio was with SWIF nearly 11 years - 10 years, 10 months and 10 days to be exact; you could say he was a perfect 10. Greg was fond of telling people that it was hotdogs that brought him to the foundation. He got to know us as a microloan client when he started Red’s Hot, the legendary hotdog stand in Hutchinson. He then joined our business finance team, working with entrepreneurs for over 5 years and then moving to fundraising for about 5 years. Greg loved sharing the SWIF story of innovation, collaboration and the positive impact people are making together across southwest Minnesota.

Diagnosed with an aggressive form of lung cancer last fall, Greg approached his journey with positivity, heart and courage. Greg left this earth Sunday, April 11. In his final days, Greg reminded us that he lived a good life and enjoyed it to the fullest. He asked us not to be sad but to keep on doing our good work and having fun doing it. And so we will, but it will be less fun without him. Our team will remember Greg for his smiles, jokes, caring ways and good-natured personality.

THANKS TO YOU, THIS YEAR WE...
Awarded $1,181 grants totaling $7,479,496 from all our funds to nonprofits and communities in our region
Closed 44 new loans totaling $1,421,884 to support businesses in southwest Minnesota

Read our entire annual impact report online at swifoundation.org/2021impact

ANNUAL IMPACT REPORT
Fiscal Year 2021

Clockwise from top:
Hsa Mu, Karen Parent Student Connector at Marshall Public Schools, Hteh Rue, co-owner of Chaw’s Asian Market in Willmar and a graduate of Elevate Community Business Academy, John Davidson (right) with friends Virgil and Barb Vanstrom, attending an age Well Live Week gathering in Catoos. Luverne Elementary School Counselor Marie Atkinson-Smeins, student Georgia and therapy dog Ally.
NEW BOARD MEMBER WELCOME

Erica Volkir of Pipestone and Benjamin Wilcox of Benson have been elected to our board of directors. Erica is the executive director of the Pipestone Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism. Ben is an attorney in his hometown of Benson, working with his father at Wilcox Law Office.

We’re excited to welcome these new members and at the same time extend our deepest thanks to retiring board members Janice Nelson of Montevideo, who served 12 years, and Mark Titus of Jackson, who served 6 years.