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 Warren
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COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
 OF THE MAHONING VALLEY

THE WEAN FOUNDATION

REGIONAL CHAMBER FOUNDATION

Nonprofit and philanthropic organizations

‘There’s never enough money’

Organizations work to help those struggling

Story by LILY NICKEL

Nonprofit and philanthropic organizations play a fundamental role in creating more equitable and thriving communities, but achieving that mission is becoming an uphill battle as poverty and racial inequity continue to keep tight grips on the Mahoning Valley.

YOUNGSTOWN WARREN REGIONAL CHAMBER FOUNDATION

As Youngstown and Warren try to fend off a decline, nonprofits and the stability they provide are more important than ever, Michael McGiffin, Youngstown Warren Regional Chamber Foundation president, said.

“They’re an economic driver, and it’s typical that nonprofits are a stabilizer in an economic downturn,” he said.

Population and median household income decline in Youngstown and Warren are concerns for those working to attract businesses and encourage business expansion, like the chamber foundation.

The median household income locally is \$48,000, compared to \$65,000 nationally, and the poverty rate is at 17.4 percent, compared to a national rate of 12.3 percent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Those statistics along with a national labor shortage make meeting that goal even more challenging, but all the more important, according to McGiffin.

“Jobs attract people, but you also need people to attract jobs,” McGiffin said.

McGiffin said the foundation’s role in the community is to fundraise, support and catalyze economic growth in the Mahoning Valley’s business community. Operating under the premise that jobs solve almost all of a community’s social problems, the foundation raises and gives on average \$450,000 in grants toward job creation and economic development programs annually.



Submitted photo

Michael McGiffin is president of the Youngstown Warren Regional Chamber Foundation.

McGiffin said the main challenge when it comes to fulfilling the foundation’s role is the legwork that comes with it.

“There is not a grasp on what economic development practices are, there is a lot of information and education that needs to occur before we can start growing funds,” he said. “There is a lot of legwork that goes into it.”

McGiffin said there is a nonprofit ecosystem in place in the Valley, formed from the roles each foundation and organization fills. He said the partnership between the foundation and other organizations is vital in order to properly serve and support the community.

COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF THE MAHONING VALLEY

The Community Foundation of the Mahoning Valley, a public charity, serves the Valley by partnering with donors to anchor a permanent and growing endowment and make investments that improve the quality of life for all residents.

“Part of our role is to gather assets from the community, for the community,” president Shari Harrell said.

In 2021, the foundation gave more than \$2.4 million, all of which went to eligible charitable organizations and scholarships, according to Harrell. Some of those funds went to job placement training, substance abuse recovery, food banks and childcare programs, she said.

While significant, Harrell said the funds were still not enough to alleviate the growing needs of the Valley.

“There’s never enough money, that’s a given,” Harrell said. “So the challenges still are how do you set priorities that meet the most pressing needs of the community in a way that’s fair, open and transparent; and how do we equitably invest in organizations that are doing real good work?”

In recent years, the foundation, along with other agencies and foundations in the Valley, has focused on operationalizing racial equity in its policies and practices. Harrell said the foundation is spending more time reviewing itself to ensure it’s being fair to everyone it serves.

“We are looking internally around issues of equity, diversity and inclusion,” Harrell said. “It goes back to our grant application, what are the questions, and how are we evaluating? Is that a fair and reasonable evaluation tool, or was that set by philanthropy based on white culture and middle-class values?”

The foundation issued a statement on its commitment to racial equity, and stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated the many social, economic and health disparities that are the consequences of systemic racism in the community.

RAYMOND JOHN WEAN FOUNDATION

Jennifer Roller, president of the Raymond John Wean Foundation, said the foundation also has put an emphasis on race equity and inclusion. She shared Harrell’s sentiment that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the existing and systemic faults in the community.

“The gap widened and disparities in health care, jobs and housing were made bare,” Roller said.

She said the Raymond John Wean Foundation’s role in the community is grantmaking, capacity building, convening and partnerships in order to create a healthy, vibrant, equitable and

economically stable Mahoning Valley.

“We’re working with residents to create a community where race doesn’t define you and your role in society,” she said.

In 2019, the foundation instituted a five-year strategic plan that included purpose statements, activities and measurements for success within the four pillars of its work: grantmaking, convening and partnerships, capacity building and operations, each intentionally designed through a lens of race equity and inclusion.

Roller said it is critical to know the what, who and how of the community: what the pressing needs are, who is in need and how can those needs be met.

In 2020, the foundation gave \$1.7 million in grants, and \$1.04 million of that was invested in the community, but Roller said the foundation’s success can’t be measured in a monetary amount.

“We measure our success not just in numbers or dollars out the door, but how close we are to meeting our mission,” Roller said.

YSU FOUNDATION

The Youngstown State University Foundation is also doing its part to solve issues plaguing the community. Access to high-quality education is a globally-recognized solution to the cycle of poverty, and adults with at least a bachelor’s degree earn more income throughout their lives, have stronger protections against unemployment risk and are less likely to experience poverty, according to the Intercultural Development Research Association.

The YSU Foundation is an independent, autonomous, private, nonprofit corporation that pursues, manages and distributes resources to support scholarships and student initiatives. The foundation has more than \$340 million in assets and gave \$9.3 million in student scholarships in 2021.

Fourteen endowments that were started at the beginning of the foundation are active and remain the source of funding for student scholarships, as well as 18 endowed chairs and professorships.

“We’re student focused, and have a long history and tradition,” said President Paul McFadden.

McFadden said despite the generous support from donors and the 14 original endowments, it never will be enough to fully meet the needs of students.

“Finances are always an issue, there is never enough money,” McFadden said.

Change in programs and enrollment has become a challenge for YSU and in turn the foundation. Enrollment has dropped by about 11 percent over the past three years, making scholarship dollars even more important as a selling point for the university, said McFadden.

“We really feel that we can impact declining enrollment. Over half of our students that walk our campus received some sort of scholarship aid from us,” McFadden said. “A lot of students are coming from economically disadvantaged situations and that decision comes down to what the school is offering.”

McFadden said the foundation is in the early stages of offering financial support for all levels of education. He said the foundation has found that YSU’s alumni tend to come from the city, making them passionate about their hometown, including the state of K-12 education.

“We’re working to expand our mission a little bit to include all levels of education,” McFadden said.

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Harrell



McFadden



Roller



The givers

Dollar amounts given in grants by the following organizations in 2021:

- Youngstown Warren Regional Chamber Foundation**
 - \$450,000 toward economic development programs
- The Youngstown Community Foundation**
 - \$2.4 million covering more than 346 awards
- The YSU Foundation**
 - \$9.3 million toward student scholarships
- Wean Foundation**
 - \$2.2 million