History

Thanks to the persistence of insurance salesman Joe U. Posner and several other community-minded individuals, the Greater Rochester Community Foundation of the Genesee Valley was incorporated on September 18, 1972, and was overseen by a 21-member volunteer board. Here are highlights of the Foundation’s work and growth:

1970 to 1979

1972: First office was located at 315 Alexander Street.
1973: Nancy Dillman Peck, the first executive director was hired on a part-time basis. The fledgling foundation received its first gifts totaling $67,960, with most coming from a gift of Rite Aid Corp. stock.
1974: Name was shortened to Rochester Area Foundation.
1976: First fund was established.
1977: Linda Shapiro Weinstein was hired as the organization’s second executive director, but she was full time.
1979: By the end of this year, the Foundation accumulated $1 million in assets.

1980 to 1989

1982: The very first “An Evening Out At Home” gala was held in 11 homes with just more than 100 guests and a dessert reception at the Academy of Medicine on East Avenue.
1984: The first field of interest funds were created, including the Community Arts Endowment, and the board of directors was led by its first-ever female chair, Malinda Fischer.
1986: Jim Littwitz established the Nonprofits Advisory Service, which helped to increase organizational efficiency, strengthen skills of boards and staffs, and create long-range planning and goal-setting.
1987: A Community Leadership grant from the Ford Foundation helped to launch the Early Childhood Education Initiative.
(later known as ECDI) and the Greater Rochester Women’s Fund was established.  
**1989:** The Foundation reached $20 million in assets with gifts from the sales of Lawyer’s Co-Op and Champion Products. The John F. Wegman Foundation was transferred to the Foundation into the John F. Wegman Fund.

1990 to 1999  
**1990:** Rochester’s Child was formed. Also started current investment portfolio; 9.1% average annual earnings (net of fees).  
**1991:** The first community Philanthropy Awards luncheon was held and Richard F. Brush was the inaugural honoree.  
**1992:** Ruth H. Scott became the first African American board chair.  
**1993:** Jennifer Leonard was hired as the third executive director to lead the organization (currently holding the titles of president and CEO). The Foundation wanted to help city neighborhoods and established the NeighborGood grant program to award smaller grants for block parties, beautification projects and more.

**1994:** When the larger arts organizations got into severe financial trouble, the Foundation led a community-wide fundraising campaign called “Arts Tomorrow” to raise money for Geva, the RPO, and Garth Fagan Dance. Joe U. Posner helped create Quad A for Kids.  
**1997:** Outgrowing office space in the Triangle Building at 335 E. Main Street, the Foundation purchased the historic home at 500 East Avenue that was built by William Ellwanger. The organization’s official name also changed to Rochester Area Community Foundation. We co-founded the WILLpower Collaborative to encourage individuals to have wills drawn up.  
**1998:** School librarian Roxanne Marshall left a $7 million bequest to support older adults in Genesee County. Two new initiatives were founded – Caring for Creeks and the Common Good Planning Center.
1999: The Foundation continued to grow and reached $100 million in assets.

2000 to 2009
2000: A Social Capital Benchmark Survey was conducted (and then repeated in 2006) and discovered that interpersonal trust in our community suffered from deep disparities correlated with race and ethnicity.
2001: Ron and Donna Fielding make a record $14 million gift to the Foundation, but anonymously. They were publicly named as the mysterious contributors, but not until the 2012 Annual Lunch. The Foundation also helped to establish the Greater Rochester After-School Alliance (GRASA).
2004: A multi-year planning process initiated by the Community Foundation resulted in the creation of The Children’s Agenda.
2005: Margaret Sánchez became the first Latina chair of the board. Under her leadership a strategic plan changed the focus to community and the donors who care about it.
2007: Rebranded as the Community Foundation with a new logo, although the legal name remained Rochester Area Community Foundation. The Rochester Women’s Giving Circle was created.
2008: NextGen Rochester, a giving circle for young professionals, was started with help from three Foundation staff members.
2009: With support from United Way of Greater Rochester, the Foundation launched a community indicators project and website of data called ACT Rochester. With a grant from Atlantic Philanthropies, the Foundation worked with many community partners to establish Boomer Mentors, which matched Baby Boomers with students in need of mentoring.

2010 to 2019
2011: The Foundation expanded its service area from six counties to eight, adding Seneca and Yates counties. Two new giving circles were formed – the African American Giving Initiative and the LGBT Giving Circle.
2012: During the Foundation’s 40th anniversary year, the assets reach $250 million and distributed a cumulative total of $300 million in grants and scholarships since its founding.

2013: With a $200,000 grant from the Foundation, the Rochester Museum & Science Center brought the exhibit, *RACE: Are We So Different?* here for three months.

- To continue conversations on race prompted by the exhibit, Facing Race, Embracing Equity (FR=EE) was started.
- In December, the Foundation and ACT Rochester released a shocking report detailing poverty and the concentration of poverty in the nine-county region.

2014: Introduced new grantmaking framework with two main goals – “Creating an Equitable Community” and “Strengthening Our Regional Vitality” – and an emphasis on fewer, larger, and more impactful grants.

- With help from concerned citizens, Dialogues Without Borders was launched for suburban citizens to gather informally and learn more about what is happening in the city.
- When flooding devastated many parts of Yates County, our Yates Community Endowment set up a disaster relief fund and raised nearly $180,000 to help neighbors in need.
- The Developmental Disabilities Giving Circle was formed by a group of parents, siblings and advocates. It is the Foundation’s fifth grassroots giving group.
- At the request of the Rochester City School District, the Foundation convened a Community Task Force on School Climate to develop plans for improving the learning and teaching environment in city schools.

2015: In January, a follow-up poverty report benchmarked Rochester’s poverty with that of 17 other similar-sized
communities — and the news was worse.

- The Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative was started and organizers made sure to include perspectives of people living in poverty.
- Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced creation of the Rochester Anti-Poverty Task Force, comprised of cabinet-level representatives from 20 state agencies to support the work of the local task force.
- A package of five grants totaling $465,000 kicked off a comprehensive effort to evaluate and improve out-of-school-time programs for city youth. This investment is one of the two largest, multi-faceted grant programs in the Foundation’s history. These grants were part of the Foundation’s largest-ever quarterly grant distribution of $1.3 million.
- Foundation assets reached $328 million.
- The foundation created by Buffalo Bills founder Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. awarded $525,000 to the Community Foundation to create a fund to find, analyze, and share data.
- The Foundation received the largest gift in its history — $61 million — from the Sands family, known for building Constellation Brands, Inc. into a leading beer, wine and spirits company. The gift established the Sands Family Supporting Foundation at the Community Foundation.

2016: The Community Task Force on School Climate, convened by the Foundation, established a new code of conduct for the Rochester City School District that won board approval. The group also recommended anti-racist training to better define, understand, and address the impact of racism and cultural bias in the schools.

- In June, the Foundation’s five giving circles celebrated the collective distribution of more than $1 million in grants since 2008.
- The Yates Community Endowment met its goal to raise $1
The Foundation introduced City of Rochester officials with Mike Ingham, a donor and entrepreneur who was volunteering with Kiva, an international, internet-based platform that connects small businesses with crowd-sourced microloans to help alleviate poverty. Kiva Rochester was launched in August to help create or grow local businesses.

ACT Rochester and the Foundation collaborated on a third report that looked at poverty and self-sufficiency and found that poverty continues to grow throughout the region.

2017: With a $5 million gift, the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation created the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Legacy Fund for Youth Sports at the Community Foundation.

- In partnership with the Wilson Foundation and Aspen Institute’s Sports & Society Program, a State of Play report was released that offered an independent assessment of the state of youth sports and recreation in our six-county Finger Lakes region. A local task force is assisting the Foundation in determining the scope of the grantmaking, starting in the Fall.
- The 10-year-old Rochester Women’s Giving Circle surpassed the $1 million mark in its grantmaking with the June distribution of $175,300 in grants.
- In August, ACT Rochester and the Community Foundation released the report, Hard Facts: Race and Ethnicity in the Nine-County Greater Rochester Area, which found we are lagging behind the state and the country.
- At the September Annual Lunch, the Foundation marked its 45th anniversary.

2018: We awarded $329,000 in grants to support 20 youth sports projects in the first grant round of the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Legacy Fund for Youth Sports. These grants will directly impact more than 6,500 youth in four counties. The interest in
this grant round was impressive, with 82 applications requesting a total of $1.5 million.

- Foundation staff completed participation in structural racism workshops involving 28 other local nonprofit organizations that was launched by St. Joseph’s Neighborhood Center. An internal team was formed to review Foundation practices, policies and procedures.
- The 21st Century Club got a new name – Catalysts for Change – and will recognize donors who make cumulative gifts of $10,000 or more earmarked for unrestricted endowment to address the pressing needs of today, tomorrow, and into the future.

2019: ACT Rochester marked 10 years of sharing independent data to drive decision-making.

- Quad A for Kids hired Isaac Bliss as its new executive director.
- NextGen Rochester, our giving circle for young professionals, celebrated its 10th anniversary of peer-led philanthropy.
- We released the Rochester Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Assessment Report that delved into how well urban entrepreneurs are served in starting, growing and transitioning their businesses.

2020 to present

2020: The pandemic brought into sharp focus the main reason for Rochester Area Community Foundation’s existence – building an endowment for our region’s current needs and ensuring that resources are available for unanticipated and evolving needs of the future. Starting in March, those forecasted future needs became a reality and endowment became the hero.

- Partnered with United Way of Greater Rochester to launch and raise money for the Community Crisis Fund. Contributions from individuals, businesses, foundations,
and organizations totaled $6.8 million. In all, 282 grants were awarded to 184 nonprofits and distributed between March 2020 and January 2021.

- Our Wayne County Community Endowment and Yates Community Endowment established Emergency Relief Funds to raise money from residents and businesses to ensure the essential work of nonprofits continued to help neighbors in need.
- Our five giving circles collectively have distributed more than $2 million since 2008 to support local nonprofits.
- We partnered with ACT Rochester for *Hard Facts Update: Race and Ethnicity in the Nine-County Greater Rochester Area* report that updated and expanded the original 2017 *Hard Facts* report in an effort to create a deeper knowledge of the disparities confronting local African Americans and Latinos.

Following the deaths of George Floyd and Daniel Prude, we outlined for the community our commitment to racial equity with a statement and shared details of our equity journey on our website.

We also established two funds to address pressing needs in our community during the pandemic and allow donors to co-invest on projects with us.

The **Racial Equity Growth Fund** supports:
- Professional development for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) nonprofit leaders;
- Innovative ideas for new BIPOC-led organizations;
- Racial equity education and training, primarily for small businesses;

The **Arts Prevail Fund** supports:
- Safety equipment for reopening of the arts, including tech support for virtual programming;
• Documentation of this historically significant moment as Rochester addressed the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter social justice movement; and
• Arts organizations that are led by and serve BIPOC.

Addressing the digital divide:

• When schools were closed in March and students sent home to learn remotely, some only had a parent’s phone for internet and many others were without any internet access or a computer. We created a COVID Education Fund to raise money to address this gap. With $170,000 from the endowed Maxion Family Charitable Fund created at the Community Foundation more than 20 years ago, plus gifts from other generous donors, we were able to address a niche need of the Rochester City School District — tablets for pre-K and kindergarten students.
• We joined forces with Monroe County, ESL, Greater Rochester Health Foundation, the Max and Marian Farash Charitable Foundation and others to raise $885,000 in just three weeks to ensure that Rochester City School District students had the necessary unlimited data and high-speed connection — through August.

2021: We added environmental sustainability and justice as one of three equity action areas in our grantmaking and community leadership.

• ACT Rochester collaborated with Trillium Health to release a report, Sexual Health in Rochester/Monroe County.
• Following recent mass shootings in Boulder, Colo., and Atlanta and a series of attacks on Asian Americans, we issued a statement reiterating our our commitment to building an equitable community for all.
• Jennifer Leonard, who has served as the Foundation’s president and CEO since 1993, announced she will retire in September 2022. Simeon Banister selected as her
successor.
- The North Star Coalition was launched to promote an inclusive and equitable post-pandemic recovery and ensure that federal and state funds are used to create opportunities for the benefit and economic prosperity of historically excluded residents.

2022: We partnered with the Democrat and Chronicle and Siena College Research Institute for a fourth triennial survey on racial attitudes, which revealed that awareness of racism and racial disparities is growing.

- To celebrate the Foundation’s 50th anniversary with the community, we launched a yearlong series of free events and performances at arts and cultural venues. More on Gifts for Good here.
- We awarded nearly $300,000 to 61 local arts programs through a partnership with the New York State Council on the Arts.
- Jennifer Leonard retired as president and CEO on September 30 after nearly 30 years at the helm.
- On October 1, Simeon Banister became the Foundation’s fourth president and CEO.
- The Latino Giving Circle, the Community Foundation’s fifth affinity group promoting philanthropy, was launched in October.