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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Corfu, Carlton, and Batavia Selected for Small Town Revitalization Initiative

Community Heart & Soul® program brings resident-driven planning to Western New York.

The Town of Carlton and Village of Corfu were selected as the first communities in Western New York to launch [Community Heart & Soul®](#), a program that helps build stronger, more connected communities centered around what people love about where they live. Batavia will follow shortly after, launching later in 2026.

“My hope is that the Community Heart & Soul process encourages greater community involvement in village decision-making and helps restore the pride, character, and sense of identity that make our little village special,” says Ken Lauer, Corfu resident, Village Trustee, and owner of Buttercrumbs Bakery.

When people talk about small rural towns, the story often focuses on what's been lost: like anchor employers, bustling main streets, and vital services. But that's only part of the story. Every small town also has strengths — including its people, traditions, quirks, and local legends — that residents don't want to lose as they plan for the future.

Through a guided, two-year process, Community Heart & Soul will help residents identify the priorities, places, and traditions that matter most, and work together to turn those shared values into action. The goal: to engage the entire community in shaping the future of their town.

"Most of our members are lifelong residents of Carlton," says Peter Bartula, one of the volunteers with Carlton Heart & Soul. "We want to help our town to achieve the success that other Heart & Soul Communities have achieved."

Developed and field-tested in more than 130 small cities and towns across the country, the Community Heart & Soul model empowers residents to dream together and access resources to

make things happen. At the end of two years, communities will have identified common ground, prioritized ideas, and developed a plan for short- and long-term action.

In 2025, [Rochester Area Community Foundation](#) and the [Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo](#) invited towns and villages with a population of 25,000 or less in Genesee or Orleans counties — areas served by both organizations — to apply. Six communities raised their hand to explore whether Community Heart & Soul was the right fit for their town. A \$1,000 mini-grant for community engagement work was offered to communities who were not selected for the initial cohort, to honor residents' efforts.

Community Heart & Soul and the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr Foundation have committed expertise and funding towards the engagement process. These resources will help pay for marketing, materials, food, event supplies, coaching, and project coordination.

Staff members from Rochester Area Community Foundation and the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo will serve as “coaches,” guiding residents through Community Heart & Soul’s four phases: imagine, connect, plan, and act.

"Heart & Soul gives residents the support to turn their ideas into action," says Sara Bukowiec, Director of Rural Community Impact at Rochester Area Community Foundation. "And it gives funders the opportunity to listen deeply and learn what's most important to these communities."

A major goal of the initiative is to build relationships between communities and their local funders, opening the door to funding opportunities during Community Heart & Soul, and in the future.

“We are honored to help bring this innovative, resident-driven process to Genesee and Orleans counties. This opportunity reflects our enduring commitment to strengthen communities across Western New York as we connect people, ideas and resources to improve lives,” says Cara Matelliano, Vice President, Community Impact, Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo.

Residents can learn more from Heart & Soul volunteers at these upcoming events:

- Village of Corfu Memorial Day Parade – Monday, May 25th at 12pm
- Town of Carlton Hometown Days – Saturday, June 6th 12pm

People interested in participating in Corfu, Carlton, or Batavia Community Heart & Soul should contact Paige O'Connor (poconnor@racf.org or 585.341.4332).

About Community Heart & Soul

Community Heart & Soul was founded by Lyman Orton, proprietor of the Vermont Country Store, after serving on his town's planning commission. He witnessed how trust could be shaken in a town of 600 people when the public participation in key decisions was low. Over the last decade, the Community Heart & Soul model has been developed and field-tested while working with more than 130 small cities and towns across America.

About Rochester Area Community Foundation

In partnership with generous philanthropists and community partners, the Community Foundation works to improve the quality of life for people who live and work in the eight-county region through its leadership and strategic grantmaking. Since it was founded in 1972, the Foundation has distributed more than \$780 million dollars in grants and scholarships.

About the Community Foundation of Greater Buffalo

For more than a century, the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo has enhanced and encouraged long-term philanthropy in the Western New York community. A 501 (c)(3) organization, the Community Foundation's mission is: Connecting people, ideas and resources to improve lives in Western New York. Established in 1919, the Community Foundation has made the most of the generosity of individuals, families, foundations and organizations who entrust charitable assets to the Community Foundation's care. Learn more at cfgb.org.

About Ralph C. Wilson, Jr Foundation

The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation is a grantmaking organization dedicated primarily to sustained investment in the quality of life of the people of Southeast Michigan and Western New York. The two areas reflect Ralph C. Wilson, Jr.'s devotion to his hometown of Detroit and greater Buffalo, home of his beloved Buffalo Bills NFL team. Prior to his passing in 2014, Mr. Wilson provided that a significant share of his estate be used to continue a life-long generosity of spirit by funding the Foundation that bears his name. Based in Detroit, the Foundation began with a grantmaking capacity of \$1.2 billion over a 20-year period, which expires January 8, 2035. This structure is consistent with Mr. Wilson's desire for the Foundation's impact to be immediate, substantial, measurable, and overseen by those who knew him best. For more information visit www.rcwjrf.org.