

NEWS Together we can make  
life here even better

BERKSHIRE COUNTY

## The Arts Build Community Initiative

*Five years of partnerships help build a culture of belonging*

Berkshire  
Taconic  
Community  
Foundation

35 YEARS

As coordinator of a Spanish-language advisory committee at the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center, Melissa Canavan is working to break barriers and bring in new audiences. Last year, the committee organized film screenings that drew nearly 200 attendees from a variety of Latin cultures. Their efforts were so successful that the director of one of the selected films and two of its actors flew in for an event.

"It really felt like home for some people," Melissa said. "It was great to see such a wonderful environment and exchange of dialogue."

Creating welcoming spaces is at the heart of our Arts Build Community initiative, which funds this work and launched in 2017 with support from the Boston-based Barr Foundation. Through research, sustained grantmaking and capacity-building support, arts education and donor engagement, Berkshire Taconic works with dozens of partners to test new approaches to community engagement that use the proven power of the arts to build trust, cooperation and unity, while strengthening the arts as a sector.

*(Continued on page 7)*



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## Message from Leadership



Community foundations are uniquely positioned to help create new opportunities and relationships that can transform thinking, shift practices and help more residents thrive.

For five years, our Arts Build Community initiative has focused squarely on bringing diverse local communities and arts and culture organizations into closer communion. In addition to addressing barriers to participation such as cost and transportation, we are working in partnership with residents and dozens of organizations to make our world-class venues the welcoming spaces they aspire to be.

BTCF's Fund for Columbia County has helped open new doors for young creatives, part of our regional effort to assist students in making successful transitions from school to careers. And one of our newest funds – established to support the Rights of Passage and Empowerment (ROPE) program for young women of color – exemplifies community philanthropy and provides donors a new way to help ROPE nurture and empower the leaders of tomorrow.

As always, the ideas and the talent are all around us for pursuing pathways to a more inclusive future that benefits us all. It is our special privilege to use tools like convening, grantmaking and building nonprofit capacity to encourage these ideas and mobilize the extraordinary people who are putting them into meaningful action.



Peter Taylor  
President

## Snapshot



*Liz Conti of Grace Immigrant Outreach has joined the team of four at the heart of NEDCorps, which addresses the struggles of residents facing housing, employment, health care and other challenges with support from the Northeast Dutchess Fund.*



COLUMBIA COUNTY

## In His Own Words: Trevor Slowinski

*Young creative builds a network at career workshop*

*Eighteen-year-old Trevor Slowinski recently participated in Hudson Hall's weeklong Live Arts and Media Training Program. Designed to build skills and knowledge for careers in Hudson's cultural, hospitality and retail sectors, the project was funded in part by BTCF's Fund for Columbia County, as part of our investments in school-to-work programming. Trevor hopes to enroll at SUNY New Paltz.*

I do creative writing, art and music primarily. I started making stuff back in middle school. I would watch shows, play video games and read books, but I wouldn't be satisfied just listening or hearing or reading. I had stories and songs in my head that wanted to get out. Eventually I found more fulfillment in creating media than consuming it.

During the workshop, I learned a lot more about how performances are organized and especially about networking with people in the creative industry. I've always been someone who operated more on his own. But I think that having people to talk to when things get rough, and things like technology to keep me organized—that's going to be really beneficial.

Programs like these are very important because a lot of people, especially in lower-income communities, may not ever have access to them. In a lot of families, these things are not generally seen as a reliable means of making a living.

In schools, there needs to be a lot more acknowledgement of creative types, especially in areas like Hudson, where there's a relatively small, underfunded art department, but still some creative people who don't really have much of a voice. There should definitely be an expansion of programs and workshops, where you can look for creative people interested in the arts and give them an opportunity to share their voice and get more involved in different fields.

For me personally, it's honestly going to take a lot of grit, a lot of classwork and independent work. I thought this out a while ago. In the future, I'm going to become a professor of writing. That way I can still write and I can have a job where I talk about writing and help people write. I definitely think that's my path. ■

*"I had stories and songs in my head that wanted to get out."*

—Trevor Slowinski,  
Workshop participant



Shirley Edgerton, far right, established the R.O.P.E. Fund to support young women of color. Daughter Akilah Edgerton (far left) and Dr. Eden-Reneé Hayes (second from left) serve as facilitators and mentors for scholars.



BERKSHIRE COUNTY

## Portraits of Generosity

*R.O.P.E. Fund offers horizon-expanding mentorship for young women of color*

Youth development has been a driving force in Shirley Edgerton's life for as long as she can remember — one motivated by female role models who lit a fire within her.

"As a teenager, my mentors identified leadership qualities in me that I didn't see," Shirley said, pointing to opportunities — from travel to training — her family could not afford to support but that women from the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church she attended made possible.

For those women who shaped her, Shirley is paying it forward.

She first arrived in the Berkshires when her late husband, the Bishop Jerome T. Edgerton Sr., was called to pastor the Second Congregational Church in Pittsfield. "We thought it was a great place to raise children," she recalled of an intentional decision to remain in the region. A second such decision — to expose her three young children to the rewards of community activism — has endured over three decades, leaving a mark on too many lives to count.

"It all began with Youth Alive," said Shirley recently, describing a journey her daughter Akilah and friend Erica Young took to turn an interest in stepping — a dance tradition popular at historically Black colleges and universities — into a multicultural, community-based arts program.

First performing at church ("The young people in the church were just awestruck," Shirley remembered), the two were soon asked to participate in a local African American festival. The girls then realized they could help fill a gap in programs focused on developing self-esteem in Berkshire County's young people of color by founding Youth Alive Step, Dance and Drum Band.

As the program grew, Shirley, who has a social work background and served as founding director, saw a need to go beyond performances to help participants "understand that college is a possibility within their reach." Without knowing how she would fund it, she organized a trip to several HBCUs in North Carolina to dispel the doubts these young people were expressing about the existence of such institutions. "If you can see yourself in a classroom, you can see yourself as a professor or a president of a college," Shirley said.

A new chapter in her leadership began while she was serving on the board of the Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts. Shirley was invited to participate in an intensive program designed to prepare women of color to be philanthropists. "It was pretty incredible," she said of the nine-month program, which allowed her to develop an initiative from which the community at large would benefit: the Women of Color Giving Circle.

Fifty community members turned out for the circle's inaugural meeting in 2004. They heard her case that supporting young women





Hayes and the Edgertons on the campus of Taconic High School in Pittsfield, a partner site.

of color — from girlhood until womanhood — would require new programming and funding. They developed a mission that very day: “To provide a resource for young girls and women of color which seeks to inspire, mentor, and enhance their lives through educational, social and spiritual development, while fostering dignity, confidence, self-respect, reliance and resilience.”

Youth Alive had produced critical insights for this work. Prior to performances, Shirley noticed the young men were focused and feeling good about themselves while the girls were uneasy. “I got the sense they didn’t feel their role as steppers was as valuable as the drummers,” she said.

R.O.P.E., or the Rites of Passage and Empowerment program, was born in 2010, when a group of 15 girls began convening for bimonthly meetings with a variety of experienced local professionals. Soon, the participants persuaded these mentors to run the program year-round.

Since then, R.O.P.E. has matured into a mentoring program with proven impact for young women of color and those who identify as female or non-binary. Its mission is to celebrate and honor the entry of adolescents into adulthood and provide them with skills and knowledge that they need to be successful, independent and responsible people.

R.O.P.E. helps participants discover their inner voice and supports all components of personal development and personal leadership, with an emphasis on college readiness, exposure to career opportunities and cultural exploration through biennial mission trips to Africa.

Last year, R.O.P.E. established a designated fund with BTCF — to harness the power of Shirley’s philanthropy and traditions of giving, and the influence of her earliest cheerleaders: her grandmother and the women at the church of her youth.

In many ways, her story has come full circle.

“Early on, I recognized how important it is to give back and to share what you’ve been blessed with,” she said. “I’m grateful there are people who want to invest in young people. When we provide youth with opportunities to feel good about themselves, and find a purpose on this earth, that impacts our community and society as a whole.” ■

*“Early on, I recognized how important it is to give back and to share what you’ve been blessed with.”*

—Shirley Edgerton,  
R.O.P.E. founder

## SUPPORT THE FUND

**SUPPORT R.O.P.E.**  
R.O.P.E. is supporting young women of color to be scholars who complete college degrees, overcoming systemic inequalities and empowering generations to come.

Make a gift to R.O.P.E.  
by mailing a check to:  
P.O. Box 1016  
Pittsfield, MA 01202





**NORTHWEST LITCHFIELD COUNTY**

# Education Update

*Summer learning and school art projects focus on future careers*

Artist Michelle Begley, left, with retiring SOAR Director Linda Sloane in front of the new mural at Salisbury Central School focused on future careers and dedicated to founder Zenas Block.



Funding for educational initiatives in Connecticut's Northwest Corner remains a priority for BTCF, as evidenced recently by a promising pilot and a significant education enrichment fund milestone.

In July, we supported a summer enrichment pilot for Region 1 middle schoolers as part of our regional investments in programming to prepare students for success in school and careers. The weeklong program, made possible by the Northwest Corner Fund, featured hands-on, inquiry-based activities. Students played the part of scientist and engineer via STEAM-based exploration with Flying Cloud Institute, and expanded their understanding of local agriculture with the HVRHS Agricultural Education Department. Outdoor activities, from ultimate frisbee to mountain biking, complemented daily enrichment offerings.

June marked the (pandemic-delayed) 20th anniversary celebration of SOAR — Seek, Originate, Aim, Reach — the nonprofit enrichment organization for Salisbury Central School now supported by the BTCF fund of the same name

from which it originated. To honor two decades of helping students reach their potential through learning opportunities beyond the classroom, students worked with a professional artist to produce a mural depicting future careers and dedicated it to the late Zenas Block — founder of both the fund and SOAR — who died in 2008.

"I know that Zenas would have loved how creative this [mural] was," SOAR Executive Director Linda Sloane told The Lakeville Journal following a ceremony in which she was also thanked for her five years of service and congratulated on her retirement.

Grants from the SOAR Fund support a range of annual projects that promote the self-discovery, talents and interests of SCS students; the organization's goal is to build a lifelong love of learning for students in areas outside the daily curriculum through workshops, assemblies, drama productions and more.

Since Berkshire Taconic launched its first education enrichment fund in 1996, we have partnered with hundreds of generous donors to establish and grow funds for every public school district in our region. ■





Grants from the Arts Build Community initiative are funding a Community Advisory Network at MASSMoCA to solicit community members' opinions about important programming and outreach decisions.

*(Continued from cover)*

For Julie Haagenon, that engagement began with her neighbors. Despite living in Berkshire County for over five years, they had never been to Tanglewood. The older couple love classical music but were intimidated by the storied venue. That's what Julie learned when she brought them to their first concert as part of an ambassador program also funded by ABC.

A former teacher who identifies as biracial and LGBT +, Julie eagerly signed on to participate in the Center for Peace through Culture's program connecting underrepresented families to cultural experiences around the county. It addresses head-on what CPC has called "insider/outsider perceptions" that persist for many year-round residents.

To prepare for her engagement, Julie received a personal tour from Tanglewood's director of patron experience, who walked the grounds with her, shared its history and briefed her on the site's accessibility. The night of the concert, Julie organized the tickets, transportation and meal, and started a dialogue with her neighbors about participating in arts and culture.

"At the heart of what we're doing is relationship building," Julie reflected recently. "As an ambassador, I've experienced a whole series of connections that I didn't expect. When we started thinking about it, we realized it's about a sense of belonging."

To date, over 60 ABC partners have received more than \$850,000 in grants and engaged nearly 10,000 residents from historically underserved populations in programming. Key features include rapid deployment of grant dollars to put new ideas into action, long-term collaborations among committed partners, and, at the center of it all, the voices and experiences of diverse communities. A generous new grant from Barr extends ABC into 2026.

It began with a team of resident-researchers who conducted community-based participatory research through surveys, interviews and focus groups, reaching over 450 Pittsfield residents. They investigated the experiences of communities of color, immigrants, youth, people living on low incomes and other residents who wish to participate in the arts but face barriers such as cost, transportation and social discomfort.

Four of those researchers continue to bring their lived experience to the ABC grantmaking committee. Two of them, Elliott Hunnewell, with experience in tourism and public health, and Drew Herzig, an LGBT activist with a fine arts background, are encouraged by changes they see on walls and stages, and in expanded and accessible promotions. Still, they are keeping a watchful eye on how arts and cultural institutions and local communities continue to integrate and build solidarity.

In the end, Herzig said, "somebody from higher up the power differential has to reach out to members of the community at a lower power level and pull them up."

"And everybody benefits from that," Hunnewell said. "It's not about the information. It's about the invitation." ■



Julie Haagenon, right, with fellow ambassador Laura Cabrera, left, and Center for Peace Through Culture's Trudy Manion.



(Left to right) Chynna Williams, Elliott Hunnewell (with mic) and Drew Herzig presented ABC research findings at a community event and serve on the ABC grantmaking committee.

ON THE COVER: Melissa Canavan, left, and Executive Director Janis Martinson of the Mahaiwe, a key partner and grantee of the Arts Build Community initiative.



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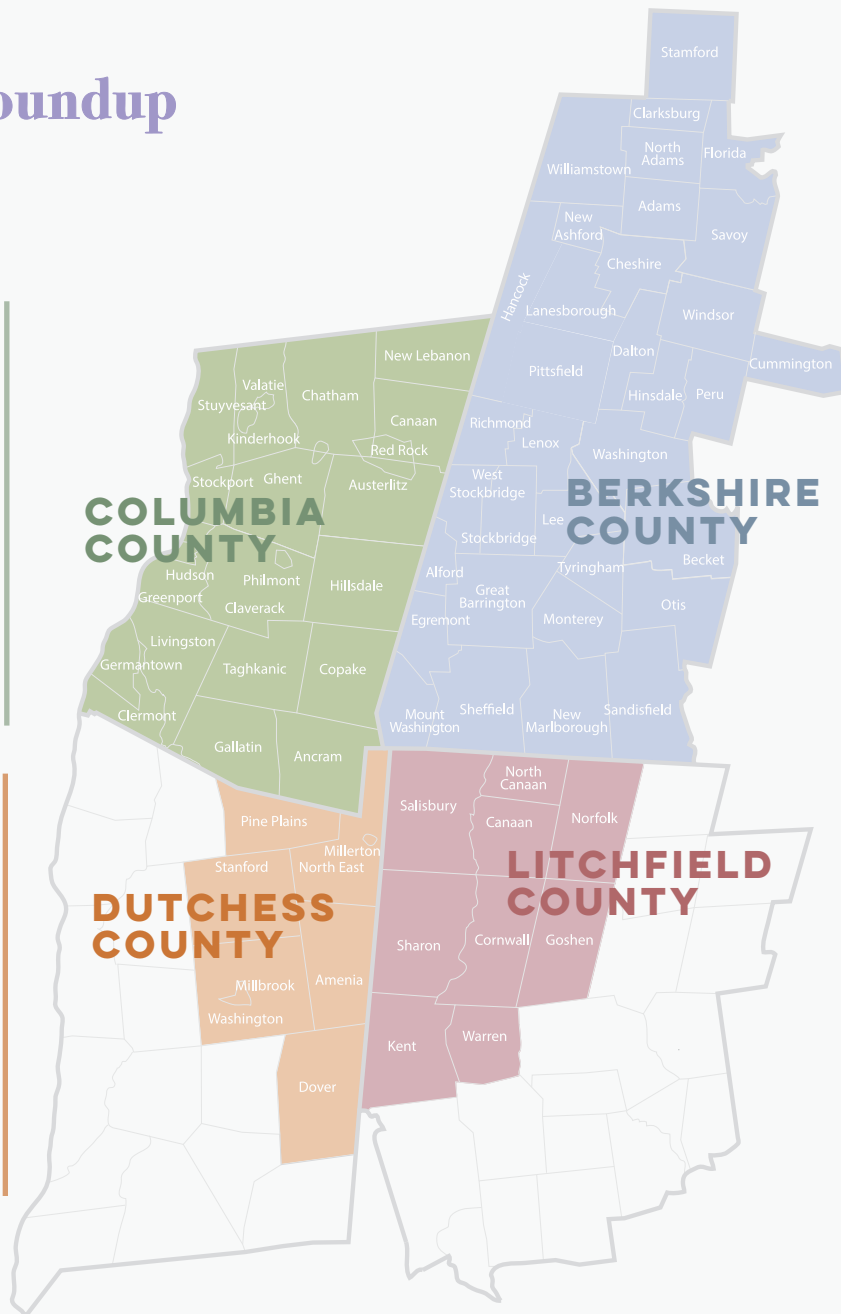
## Regional Roundup

On Oct. 21, Berkshire Taconic, Columbia-Greene Community College and Columbia Economic Development Corporation co-host Skilling the Gap, a half-day forum for employers, schools and nonprofits to build local talent for in-demand careers.

Our Fresh and Healthy Food for All initiative granted \$47,000 to 10 organizations for projects that provide access to food for Columbia County residents, especially households with limited resources.

BTCF's board welcomes Millerton's Gregg Osofsky, operations director of the Watershed Center and CFO of Hammertown, and Daniel S. Sternberg of North East, who was a corporate lawyer for 30 years and chairs the Wassaic Project board.

The Northeast Dutchess Fund awarded over \$190,500 to 25 organizations, including an increase in funding to nonprofits that provide fresh food to those in need.



Our Arts Build Community initiative awarded a total of \$42,000 to the Center for Peace through Culture, the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center and MASS MoCA for ambassador programs that bring diverse local communities into closer connection with arts institutions.

Two educators received the \$10,000 James C. Kapteyn Prize for excellence in teaching: Jolyn Unruh of Monument Mountain Regional High School and Kimberly Karlin of the Academy at Charlemont.

A new federally qualified health center in North Canaan will serve individuals and families with support from partners including the Foundation for Community Health and multiple BTCF funds.

The HVRHS Alumni Association paid tribute to Ed Kirby, a beloved coach, teacher and administrator at Housatonic Valley Regional High School. The effort raised over \$150,000 for the fund to improve the baseball field and name it in Kirby's honor.