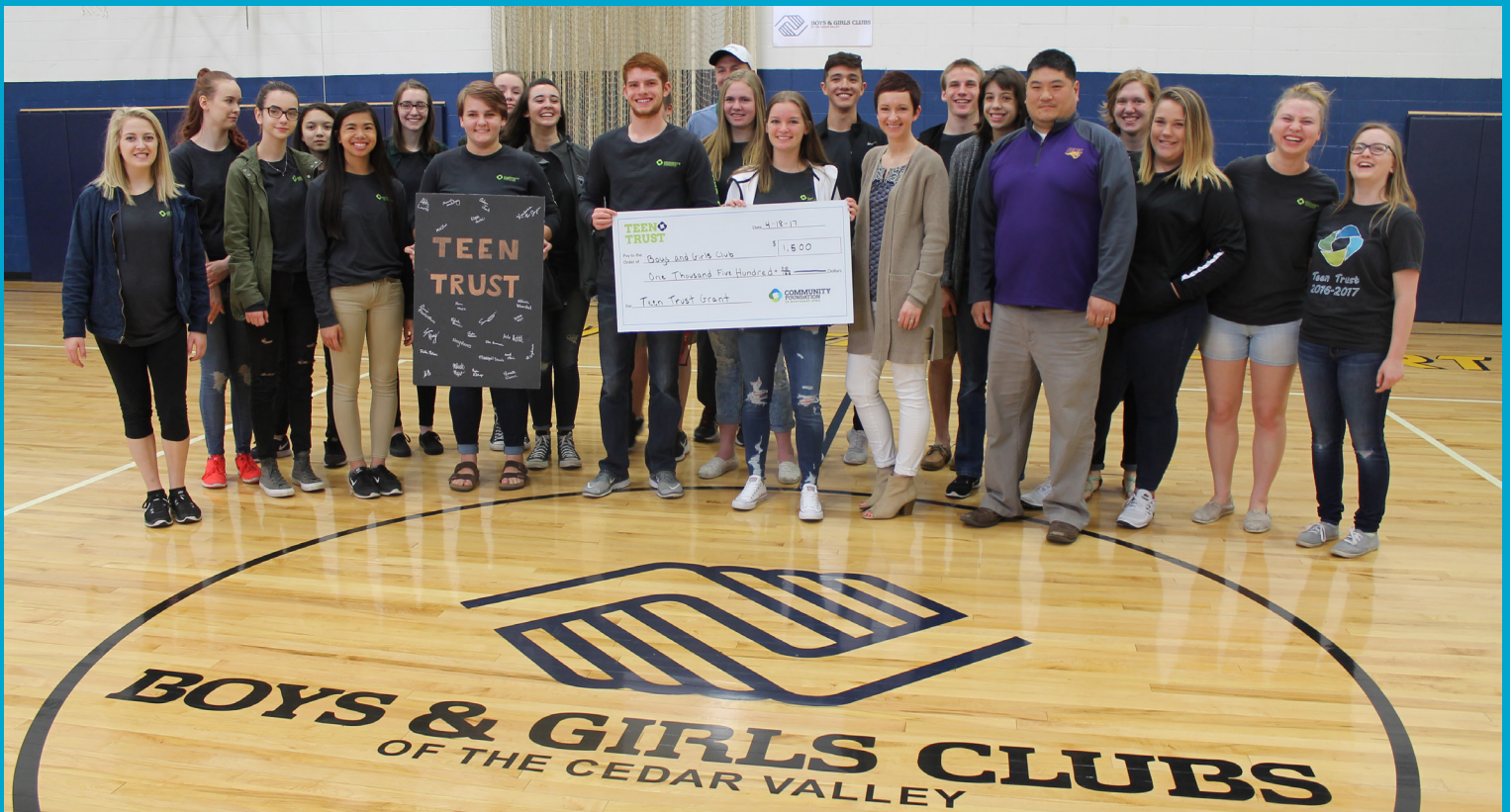


TEEN TRUST

COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF NORTHEAST IOWA

25 Years of Teens Making a Difference



Reflections on Life Lessons, Community, and Fun

IN THE BEGINNING

MARY ANN BURKE

25 years ago, the Community Foundation of Northeast Iowa was led by Mary Ann Burke, who is now the official “chief retirement officer.” Burke was the first staff person and CEO in 1993, and thanks to her leadership, the Teen Trust program was formed. In 1994, the CFNEIA applied for an endowment grant from the Kellogg Foundation and received a \$149,000 grant to kick-start the Teen Trust program, which was going to be a model youth philanthropy student-led program that granted out \$10,000 annually.

“Even at the very beginning, the trustees set up the application process and actually used to conduct their own meetings,” said Burke. “For a while we tried no leadership structure, but it didn’t go over great, so we incorporated parliamentary systems and procedures. This ‘Student Director’ position offered great opportunities for leadership for those out of high school as well. We have had wonderful overseers.”

So how did the program get its name? After weeks of the Community Foundation playing around with different versions, Burke went home to her husband who simply said, “Just name it Teen Trust.” Its youth run, and they are trusted to “do good” in their community. Simple, and it has stuck! Starting with only 13 members, Teen Trust now has 24 board members from high schools in Black Hawk County.

The founding of Teen Trust stemmed from the need of having youth understand the world of philanthropy. There also was not a lot of opportunities in Black Hawk County for area high schools to network and connect, and Teen Trust could be a solution to that. Now, teens from more than 11 high schools annually work together in this diverse board and create partnerships instead of rivalries.

“It amazes me how responsible the teens are at making such important decisions for their community,” said Burke. “Parents said Teen Trust was one of the best programs their children took part in.” Parents may be impressed with this program, however, as a student-led and run program, parents have traditionally had very little or no involvement in the program. This type of youth philanthropy program was so successful that other Foundations approached CFNEIA for more information on how they can start their own such program.

For the Kellogg Foundation’s 75th anniversary, they recognized the Teen Trust grant as one of the best nonprofit programs and grants ever given.

A CAREER OF SERVICE GETS ITS START

SUNNI SWARBRICK

Not only did Sunni Swarbrick serve as a trustee in high school in 2001-2002, but she also was the Student Director shortly after during college. “When I first learned about the program, my outlook on giving back to the community didn’t have a broad perspective. One of the most rewarding parts of Teen Trust was being able to go out and learn about the needs in the community.”

After participating and then leading the Teen Trust program, Swarbrick was able to “elevate herself as a young leader in the community” and gained valuable leadership skills. Being a trustee helped her gain respect for other communities and for people who come from different places and have diverse backgrounds.

“Teen Trust was one of the most rewarding experiences. I was so impacted by my experience as a trustee, and I encourage any young high school student to seek this out. This is such a unique and extraordinary experience,” said Swarbrick. “I will forever be thankful for having the opportunity to serve as the Teen Trust Student Director. Being in this leadership position helped mold and shape who I am today, and I am proud that we were able to make such an important impact.”

Now, Swarbrick works at the ED Story County Community Foundation and describes it as a “dream come true.” Teen Trust instilled a life-time commitment to philanthropy and nonprofit work, and the values she gained have carried with her. Empowerment. Autonomy. That is what Teen Trust gives participants.



A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

MADULA SHAH

Madula Shah is a parent of two former Trustees, Monisha (1995-96) and Kushal (1999-2000). Even though these experiences were about 20 years ago, Shah still remembers the impactful experiences her daughter and son had during their time in Teen Trust.

“Teen Trust taught them how to work in a group and how to manage things. My daughter, Monisha, became more curious about the world around her, developed leadership skills and became more involved in school. They both thoroughly enjoyed being a part of this program.”

What are they up to now? Monisha currently stuck with the nonprofit field and is involved in

environmental engineering after double-majoring in economics and chemical engineering.

“Monisha has actually applied for a Teen Trust grant in her career to request funds for the Department of Energy.”

Kushal on the other hand went to school for biology and anesthesiology, and is now working with employee management and youth problem-solving at West High School in Waterloo. Both Kushal and his sister have taken what they have learned and the skills they developed from the Teen Trust program and utilize it today in the nonprofit field and positive work they are doing in their communities.

“I am so proud that both of my children were able to participate in the Teen Trust program,” said Madula. When asked if she would recommend other parents to encourage their children to apply, Madula said “Oh sure! Since my children, I have recommended other youth to apply and join.”

CONNECTION TO PEERS AND COMMUNITY

BLAKE CARLSON

In the 2013-2014 Teen Trust program year, Blake Carlson was a junior in high school who had a plan to get involved in his community as soon as possible. Teen Trust gave him “those small steps of experience” that set him apart from others and gave him a little extra boost for when he graduated and now has moved on to his future endeavors.

“Teen Trust gave me an opportunity to get to see different aspects and perspectives of different schools and people,” said Carlson. “It was nice to connect with people who had the same entrepreneurial mindset as me.” Blake remembers a guest speaker who was brought into a meeting and how it was “nice to listen to someone who’s done this work for a period of time,” and he remembers being able to “step out, talk to other people, and get involved in the community.”

The dynamics of Teen Trust is what Carlson also remembers well. “There was an atmosphere during meetings where everyone knew we could be respectful with each other- it was professional. The group was quite well-rounded.” He enjoyed being able to plan things as a group, and connecting with his fellow trustees. “I learned a lot and really enjoyed it.”

SEEING THE BIGGER PICTURE

TORY FLACK

Actor Tory Flack didn’t always know what she wanted to do with her life. During her junior year in high school in 2003 when she was involved in Teen Trust, she felt she was playing the part of a grown up in this program. “It was an opportunity to experiment with adulthood.” It was Teen Trust that made her realize that whatever she did, she wanted to do something that would make a positive difference.

“I started to care about my future and I really buckled down,” said Flack. “I saw that what I was doing was important. You felt a sense of responsibility and that you were important. It was fun to have a voice and an opinion, and to be heard.”

Teen Trust has a way of bringing ideas and people together. It offers an important and eye-opening lesson that “many don’t represent the stereotypes give to them by what school they go to,” like kids from a certain school are rich or uptight. Instead of instigating rivalry that schools do,

Teen Trust brings these young leaders together to work towards a common goal of learning how to be philanthropic.

“There are so many little pieces that make up a community, and they are all important,” said Flack. “The world is so much bigger than high school.”

Flack clearly remembers how much fun it was to hand out the checks to the nonprofits at the end of the year as one of her favorite parts about Teen Trust. The thing that sticks out the most though is how different of an opportunity this program is compared to school. “Playing games during meetings and participating in interviews was an experience you just couldn’t get in a classroom. You’re not sitting there listening to someone yack at you. You are ‘guided’ rather than ‘directed.’ I would have liked to do it every year.”



A GROUNDWORK FOR GIVING BACK

JACKIE CYRZAN

Jackie Cyrzan was on the grants committee during her time in Teen Trust during the 2000-2001 year. Her enthusiasm about the importance of this program has not waned one bit and she still is grateful for the opportunity to be involved in this youth philanthropy program in high school.

“Teen Trust is an amazing opportunity for teens,” said Cyrzan. “You typically don’t get involved in board dynamics until you dive into your career, so it is a great jumpstart into the world of nonprofits and learning the importance of grants. It teaches you right away the importance of being involved in your community. If you weren’t exposed to Teen Trust or similar initiatives, you might not understand the importance of philanthropy.”

Although Jackie does not remember much from your time in Teen Trust 17 years ago, she does remember that it was as great opportunity to meet people outside of your school, and

she fostered great friendships because of it. She also has been dedicated to continue her philanthropic efforts, saying that “there is something awesome and special about giving back to people who really need help.” When asked if she would recommend future high school students to apply to Teen Trust, she said “Absolutely. 100 percent.”

Cyrzan graduated from Iowa State University with a marketing/advertising degree, and has spent the past 12 years traveling around to plan corporate events. She recently moved back to Waterloo, Iowa from south Florida for a career change to radiology, and is jumping right back into the philanthropy scene as well. She is involved in Junior League, Silos & Smokestacks, and Philanthropic Education Organization (PEO), a philanthropic organization where women celebrate the advancement of women.

“Everyone should be involved and volunteer!” said Cyrzan.



A PATH TO SERVICE

LA RAE RANDALL

La Rae Randall participated in Teen Trust for two years. She loved the program so much that she couldn't resist but to come back as the Teen Trust Student Director when she was in college, where she graduated with her Certified Nonprofit Professional (CNP) from the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance (NLA).

“Teen Trust made a huge influence on my career path. Teen Trust was a program where I felt I was truly able to make a difference, and it also introduced me to the nonprofit sector, which became

important to me as a college student,” said Randall. “As a sophomore, I joined NLA, formerly called American Humanics, which further exposed me to the world of nonprofits.”

Since graduating from college, Randall has worked at the Cedar Valley Arboretum and Botanic Gardens, and was also the Director of the Grundy County Chamber of Commerce. This truly shows the wonderful work that Teen Trust alumni are doing in their communities.

“I think Teen Trust is an amazing program that really allows students from all walks of life in the Cedar Valley to feel powerful and involved,” said Randall. “I would absolutely recommend participating in Teen Trust. You can make a very real, tangible difference, and it gives students a sense of pride. It also allows friendships between students to form who are from difference walks of life and from schools they might not interact with normally.”

One of La Rae’s favorite memories from Teen Trust is the grant announcement day when they told the recipients they had received a Teen Trust grant. “Some of the students piled into a van, drove to each location, and surprised them with large ‘checks’ and balloons. It was an amazing feeling.”

LEADERSHIP WITH A HEART FOR COMMUNITY

BEKAH BASS

“I would recommend this program to every high school student who wants to change the world someday, because it is never too early to start.”

These words were spoken by trustee and alumni, Bekah Bass, who served during the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 program years. During her second year in Teen Trust, Bass was the grants committee chair. Bekah also served as student director from 2018 to 2021.

“Committees become very close, and this program has a way of making it very easy to make friends with people who care about their community has much as you do,” said Bass. “Despite the differences in ages and schools, everyone’s voices are equally valued and sought out.”

As the grants chair, Bass did a graceful job guiding her committee and the Teen Trust Board of Directors through the sometimes difficult discussions surrounding grant decisions.

“My favorite memories from Teen Trust are of the great, and sometimes tense, discussions we had both years. There are so many thoughtful students involved every year who think about aspects of problems in diverse and creative ways,” said Bass. “Every organization we visited was so grateful, and it was easy to feel like we were really making a difference.”

It was Teen Trust that made Bass recognize the nonprofit sector as a viable career option. “I have always been interested in society and social justice, so seeing the wide array of organizations trying to right wrongs in my own community inspired me to keep an open mind about how I can better the world around me,” said Bass.

Her biggest takeaway from the program is that it is important to face the needs in the community head on. “I think that the experience of Teen Trust makes the trustees think more about their position and responsibilities within their community,” said Bass. “It is easy to forget about issues that don’t affect oneself, but Teen Trust forces students to face the issues like poverty in one’s own backyard.”

Students don't only learn about the problems facing citizens in the Cedar Valley, but they also learn about the nonprofit organizations who are doing something about it. "This knowledge compels trustees to continue to be involved in their communities and seek out opportunities to better it," said Bass.

Currently, Bekah is studying sociology, which has given her a wide range of skills that she can apply to many different careers.

