

a magazine for friends of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation

# GREATER together

## Spotlight on the south side

Foundation interrelated  
investments promote  
vibrancy, opportunity  
and well-being



 Greater Milwaukee  
FOUNDATION  
*greater together*

Volume 9 Issue 2 December 2024

# GREATER together

A MAGAZINE FOR FRIENDS OF THE  
GREATER MILWAUKEE FOUNDATION  
VOLUME 9 :: ISSUE 2 :: DECEMBER 2024

**VISION** Greater Milwaukee becomes a vibrant, economically thriving region comprised of welcoming and inclusive communities that provide opportunity, prosperity and a high quality of life for all.

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Isabella Rivera, owner of Isla Bella Coffee Roasters, lead barista and director of experience for BizStarts Community Market.

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# WHAT'S inside

DECEMBER 2024



## 2 Place & Time

Discover how the Greater Milwaukee Foundation's interwoven investments in early childhood education, economic opportunity, affordable housing, health and wellness, and arts and culture are strengthening the south side.

## 15 3 ways we're promoting health and well-being in greater MKE

## 16 Meet our new President and CEO Greg Wesley

## 20 ThriveOn King: A vision in photos

## 24 Celebrating excellence: 2024 Greater Together Award honorees



# PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

A defining characteristic of community foundations is their place-based nature. Our connection to our collective home – including its history, its people and its values – is how the Greater Milwaukee Foundation stands apart in our approach to philanthropic impact.

Place does not limit us. Foundation donors can and do support organizations and causes they care about across the globe. A significant majority of our community investments, however, are made right in our own backyard.

Over the last five, full years (2019-2023), the Foundation and donors who partner with us for their philanthropy have awarded approximately \$334 million in grants to organizations and efforts everywhere.

Of those total grant dollars, nearly 92 percent supported organizations and initiatives in Wisconsin. And of those Wisconsin grant awards, 91 percent of the funding stayed in Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Washington and Waukesha counties.

Even within our region, there are places where focused funding is sometimes warranted, to counterbalance historic disinvestment and to help ensure everyone in our broader community has opportunity for a

higher standard of living. In this edition of the Greater Together magazine, we are excited to show you how focused investments on the south side of Milwaukee are making a difference and bringing people and sectors together for positive change.

Place matters. Elsewhere in this issue, you'll learn a little more about my path to the Foundation, and how my connection to my childhood home as well as my longtime hometown of Milwaukee, weigh prominently in how I approach my work and role as president and CEO. You will also have a chance to see for yourself how the Foundation's new home at ThriveOn King has come to life over the course of 2024.

Place impacts us every day, and through our philanthropy and collaboration, we can have an incredibly positive impact on place.

Gregory M. Wesley  
President & CEO  
Greater Milwaukee Foundation

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# Place & time

## How recent Foundation investments across sectors are helping the diverse south side thrive

Milwaukee's south side is a vibrant, dynamic tapestry of cultures, businesses and communities that reflect the heart and character of the city, as well as its challenges and opportunities.

The Greater Milwaukee Foundation has strategically invested in this part of the city, channeling resources into key areas that shape the well-being of its diverse population. From improving access to education and health care to supporting local businesses, entrepreneurs, arts and culture and housing initiatives, the Foundation's shared community vision of a Milwaukee for all is weaving together investments and relationships that enhance the building blocks of a high quality of life.

Through partnerships with nonprofits and the community as well as sustained investments through the generosity of donors, the Foundation has worked to empower residents, preserve cultural heritage and create opportunities for growth, helping this community flourish. These initiatives have reinforced the south side as a vital part of Milwaukee's identity, bridging gaps and fostering a thriving, inclusive ecosystem that benefits all.



A dancer from Bembé Drum & Dance

# Little learners, big opportunities

When **St. Joseph Academy's** littlest learners enter through its doors, they're greeted by the sight of a brand-new indoor play space. Complete with a sandbox, playground, kitchen and more, the space allows for children to play, explore and learn beyond the classroom.

In 2023, St. Joseph's received a \$49,300 Foundation grant to support this project.

"Children learn best through play and interaction and engagements, so having the ability to offer a safe environment of learning, free of hazards and bursting with sense-stimulating opportunities, supports development and learning in an enjoyable and healthy way," said Diana Acevedo Rios, St. Joseph Academy Early Childhood Education Center's associate director.

Director Karrie Krueger said the space showcases the quality programming St. Joseph's offers to families while playing a crucial role in the curriculum that is designed for children to be lifelong learners.

"Kids at this age learn through play, but we develop that play into opportunities where kiddos are learning important skills to promote vocabulary, math, literacy and all those kinds of skills," Krueger said.

**Notre Dame School of Milwaukee** received \$140,000 in support from the Foundation for its early childhood education facilities to add two new classrooms and install air conditioning units. Additional donor support led to a new gym, library, outdoor space, safety equipment and more.

A Ricardo Diaz  
Early Learning  
Academy student



**"When you walk through the building, you get the feeling that something's going on here and it's pretty good."**

*Judy Keyes, Foundation donor*

"It's a real honor and privilege for everybody at the school to know that there are people out there who invest in what we're trying to do," said Patrick Landry, Notre Dame's president.

Notre Dame's approach encourages recurring volunteers such as Judy Keyes, a Foundation donor, who has volunteered as a math tutor and previously served on its board.

"When you walk through the building, you get the feeling that something's going on here and it's pretty good," Keyes said. "A good student there is admired, and people know that to do well eventually, they have to do well in school. The motivation comes from the other students and from the community. It's easy to work in an environment like that."

In addition to giving directly, donors have supported many of the Foundation's strategic investments in the sector by contributing to the Early Childhood Education Fund. The Foundation's support also includes research. In 2020, the study "A Seat at the Table," commissioned by the Foundation, reported on the need for more quality seats in early childhood education for children on the south side.



**"We believe education is the best inheritance you can leave your children."**

*Laura Gutiérrez, CEO, United Community Center*

The United Community Center responded to this need with the **Ricardo Diaz Early Learning Academy**, which has benefited from much Foundation and donor support.

"The data that the Foundation provided the community is a game changer," said Laura Gutiérrez, UCC's CEO. "It helped us leverage millions of dollars from other foundations. Due to the data, we were able to tell our story."

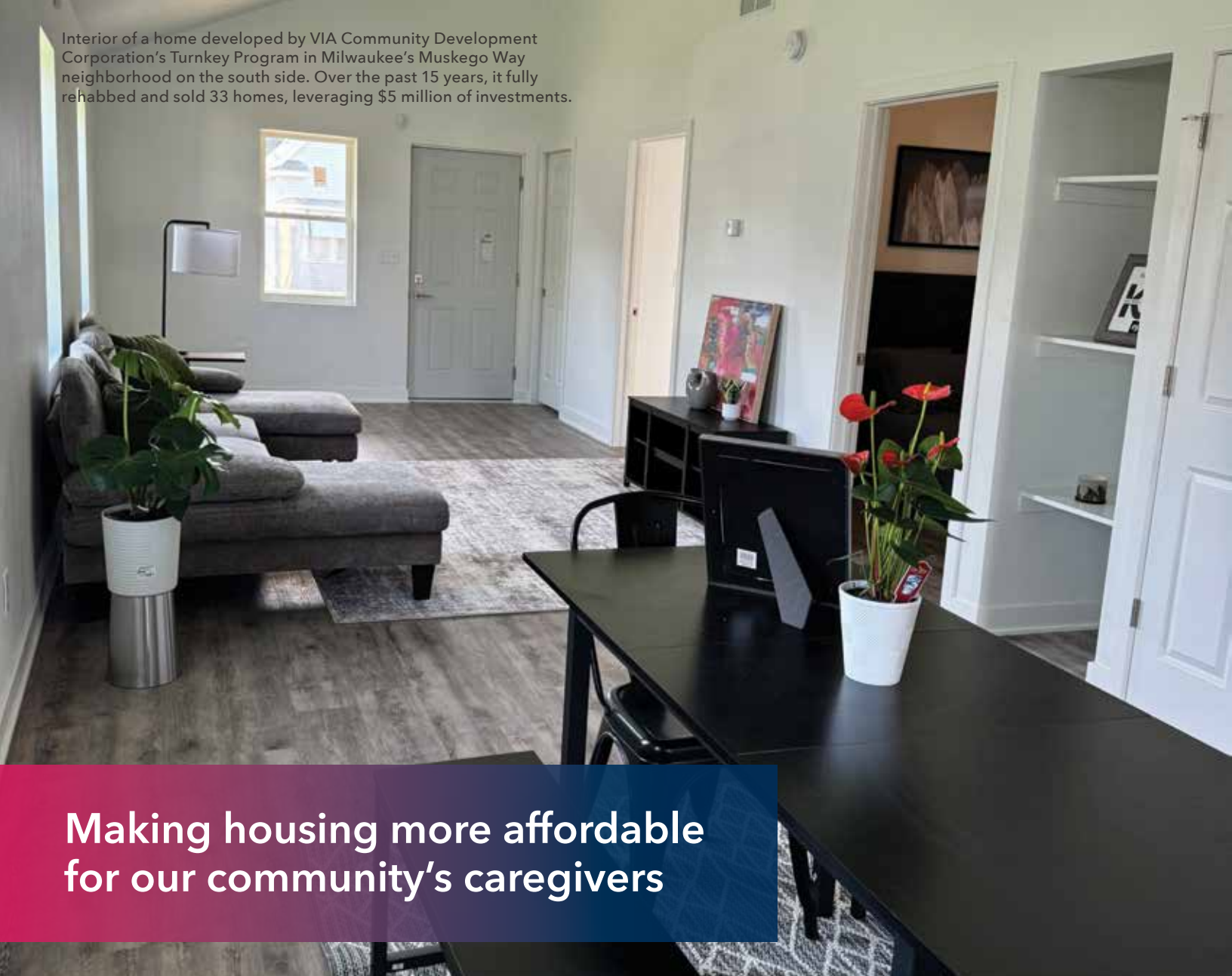
Today, the Ricardo Diaz Early Learning Academy serves more than 300 students.

"We believe education is the best inheritance you can leave your children," Guiterrez said. "We saw this as an opportunity that could help not only our families but the entire community from an educational perspective."



Foundation donors have generously donated to Notre Dame School of Milwaukee over the years, leading to new classrooms and other amenities.

Interior of a home developed by VIA Community Development Corporation's Turnkey Program in Milwaukee's Muskego Way neighborhood on the south side. Over the past 15 years, it fully rehabbed and sold 33 homes, leveraging \$5 million of investments.



## Making housing more affordable for our community's caregivers

Bridging the Foundation's deep investments in early childhood education and affordable housing, a new project is providing an innovative solution to the economic challenges faced by those teaching and caring for our community's youngest learners. The Early Childhood Educator Home Initiative is another way the Foundation is working differently with partners on connected strategies that address the needs of the whole person.

"It's no secret that early childhood educators do some of the most important work in our city," said JoAnna Bautch, executive director of **VIA Community Development Corporation**, one of the four local developers chosen for the project. The Foundation has supported VIA in a variety of ways since 2002, for a total of nearly \$900,000. The organization also recently became an agency endowment partner, investing with the Foundation for its sustained future.

"Yet sadly, those educators aren't being paid good wages, and many are looking for better opportunities to support themselves and their families. This initiative will encourage them to stay in this critical workforce area."

The initiative – managed and funded by the Community Development Alliance and LISC Milwaukee – is subsidizing construction of 46 entry-level homes across Milwaukee. The homes will be reserved for purchase by early childhood educators who are income-qualified and first-time homebuyers.

VIA is developing 14 houses – nine are on the near south side and five in the Washington Park neighborhood. The 1,100-square-foot, three-bedroom, one-bath homes will be built on city-owned vacant lots (purchased for \$1) for a subsidized price of \$100,000. The homes will have basements with egress windows and rough-in plumbing to allow families to grow in them.



“For some families, these will be starter homes. For others, forever homes,” Bautch said.

VIA is partnering with two early childhood education providers, United Community Center on the south side and Rooted and Rising in Washington Park, to recruit homebuyers and prepare them for homeownership through HUD-approved first-time homeownership courses.

VIA recently sold its first new construction home on the south side on Oct. 31 to an early childhood educator who works at the UCC. It broke ground for five additional south side houses in June 2024 and five houses in Washington Park neighborhood in September. VIA will start work on the final three south side houses as part of the initiative in April 2025.

“This is a really great opportunity not only to support early childhood educators but to tackle the problem of vacant lots, which are eyesores and lead to illegal dumping and other problems,” she said.

This is the first new construction venture for VIA, which has been rehabbing homes since 2008 through the Turnkey Program, which transforms vacant bank- and city-owned properties into fully renovated, move-in-ready homes for income-qualified households. The south side-based organization serves the neighborhoods of Silver City, Burnham Park and Layton Park.



**“This is a really great opportunity not only to support early childhood educators but to tackle the problem of vacant lots, which are eyesores and lead to illegal dumping and other problems”**

JoAnna Bautch, executive director of VIA Community Development Corporation

That program achieved multiple goals, including addressing foreclosures, increasing affordable homeownership opportunities, reducing crime, increasing neighborhood home values near each home renovation, combating housing displacement, and employing minority-owned contractors. Over the past 15 years, VIA fully rehabbed and sold 33 homes, leveraging \$5 million in investments.

One south side family, Jacobo and Cely Ramirez and their young son, are delighted with their turnkey home on South 25th Street, which they purchased in 2023. VIA provided valuable guidance throughout the process, helping them understand each step clearly.

“It’s the perfect sized home for our family,” Cely said. “I love the beautiful kitchen and the vibrant colors throughout the house.”

Added Jacobo, “We feel incredibly blessed to finally be homeowners. Don’t give up! There are numerous resources available to help you achieve your dream.”



The team from VIA Community Development Corporation breaks ground on new homes as part of its Early Childhood Educator Home Initiative.

## Healthy mind, healthy bodies, healthy community

When accounting for community well-being, food plays a significant role in one's mental, physical and emotional health. **Hanan Refugees Relief Group** and the **Gerald L. Ignace Indian Health Center** see the connection every day.

Hanan, which means "compassionate" in Arabic, is a refugee resettlement agency that works with more than 800 refugees a year. Its services include a halal food pantry and cultural food advocacy program, which helps refugees navigate the food environment in Milwaukee, from finding affordable supermarkets or ethnic stores to using FoodShare to acquire certain spices or foods. It's located on Howell Avenue, just north of Mitchell International Airport.

"A lot of refugees come in with PTSD, and they already have mental health issues and then to add on a new environment and a new culture ... we want to make it easier for them," said Sheila Badwan, Hanan's executive director.

The Foundation provided \$125,000 in grants over the past two years to support Hanan's food pantry and essential family support for refugees navigating the challenges associated with transitioning from their home country.

Children may struggle to adjust, and some stop eating if they don't have their customary foods, but a welcome basket of culturally appropriate foods makes it easier, Badwan explained.

The Gerald Ignace Indian Health Center provides culturally appropriate food during community gatherings and peer support groups. As an indigenous health center, it provides resources and care for Native Americans based in Milwaukee, throughout Wisconsin and across the nation.



"A lot of refugees come in with PTSD, and they already have mental health issues and then to add on a new environment and a new culture ... we want to make it easier for them."

*Sheila Badwan, Hanan's executive director*

Through the Gerald L. Ignace Indian Health Center's behavioral health services program, Native American youth participate in activities designed to build self-esteem, resilience and confidence.



Hanan Refugees Relief Group provides culturally familiar foods to refugees and immigrants in need through its halal food pantry program, which the Foundation supported.

In 2023, a \$30,000 Foundation grant funded culturally specific and trauma-responsive mental health services for Native American youth. The grant supported the purchase of materials such as food and supplies for activities designed to build self-esteem, resilience and confidence.

“We’re always trying to provide a space that’s mutually welcoming and accepting but also provide those traditions and safe spaces and ceremonial ties of healing,” said Stacey Hollister, deputy director of behavioral health, grants management and community programming.

Hollister continued, “Especially in the suicide prevention realm, we talk about protective factors ... social connection is one of those really big protective factors. Social connection is something that we’re growing here in

all of our community programming, gatherings, groups, classes, things like that that are happening, and it’s fostering that peer-to-peer connection.”

At the center, 930 W. Historic Mitchell St., clinicians integrate culturally based mindful practices such as smudging and beadwork as well as affirmational phrases in Potawatomi, Ojibwe, Ojibwemowin and Ukehuwenéha.

“The antidote to historical trauma is culture,” said Alaina Hanks, clinical director of child and family therapy. “We’ve learned over the years through people who’ve done this work to identify what is going to help with these massive disparities, and the answer always comes back to culturally specific integrations.”



## Beautifying Milwaukee, expanding worlds

For **La Familia de Arte**, a grassroots organization that creates community-based artwork with multicultural and intergenerational artists, art is the tool of choice to beautify, educate, inform and foster community. The organization's basic mission is to use art to help the community express itself through storytelling.

Since 2021, La Familia has received \$134,000 in support from the Foundation and its donors. This funding supported La Familia's pandemic memorial along Cesar Chavez Drive to honor essential workers and those who lost their lives.

"We didn't have a lot of history back then, but the Greater Milwaukee Foundation could see something in us and encouraged and supported us," said Lori Gramling, La Familia's executive director.

All of the work La Familia produces encourages the community members to embrace their cultural identity. The Prince of Peace mural, for example, celebrates the parish's diversity with depictions of Native American dancers, Hmong refugees and South American immigrants.



**A student of the Latino Arts Strings Program.**

"Reaching out to neighbors is one intention we always keep in mind," Jacky Gutierrez, associate director of La Familia, said.

She often tells the group's young artists, "This is more than something that's going to be meaningful to you; it's meaningful to everyone."



**Bronzeville: Remembering the Past, Living the Present and Visioning the Future** created by La Familia de Arte, which is featured in a window display case at ThriveOn King.

At **Latino Arts**, art and cultural education intersect to create spaces of learning through its galleries, programs and classes. The Foundation and donors have supported Latino Arts since its beginning in 1986.

“We are so grateful for the support that the Foundation has given us through the years,” said Jacobo Lovo, its managing artistic director. “It has allowed us to bridge the gap between what kind of art our students or young people in a community are exposed to and create accessibility. Not only that, but we are able to plan for the future because we have that support.”

One of Latino Arts’ anchor programs is the Latino Arts Strings Program, which offers classical training to pre-college students ages five through 18. The program receives support from the String Academy of Wisconsin, an advised fund at the Foundation that supports string programs throughout Milwaukee.

“String programs are vital to the community and to students and families and their schools,” said Darcy Drexler, one of the academy’s fund advisers. “Learning an instrument, you develop focus, you develop discipline, you learn how to fail, you develop empathy and creativity. With a program like Latino Arts, these kids get together, they work hard, but they have fun.”

For Lovo, the string program is only one example of the influence that Latino Arts has on the south side.

“We are here for the community, ultimately, is what we want them to know,” Lovo said.

“This is a safe space for them to come explore art. It is a place where you can bring your children, and, whether you’re from the community or from outside, you can have an authentic experience.”

## A game changer and guiding light for small businesses



Isabella Rivera, owner of Isla Bella Coffee Roasters, is one of hundreds of entrepreneurs who have benefited from training and mentorship provided by BizStarts.

The Foundation is having a huge impact on the whole south side ecosystem, and nowhere is this more apparent than through its support of small businesses.

In addition to providing financial capital through its impact investing program, the Foundation has long supported **BizStarts Milwaukee**. This decade-old organization has helped hundreds of grassroots entrepreneurs – from small stores to scalable start-ups – with the knowledge they need to get a business running.

BizStarts' resources are provided by business leaders, seasoned academics, subject matter experts and successful

entrepreneurs, many of whom are Black or Brown. Options include one-on-one coaching, workshops, peer learning, access to partner resources, personalized mentoring, business plans and periodic reviews of a business' operations and processes.

For most BizStarts entrepreneurs, the first step in the journey is the BizStarts Institute, a six-week "boot camp" with 25 students per cohort. The institute meets on six consecutive Saturday mornings. Classes are offered in English, Spanish and American Sign Language. Most of the potential entrepreneurs come from low-to-moderate-income neighborhoods and communities of color.

“What is unique about our program is that it’s not the traditional entrepreneurship taught in college,” said Patrick Snyder, BizStarts president. “It’s not about a seed round or the weighted average cost of capital. It’s much more practical: how to market if you don’t have any money, how to get people to work for you if you can’t pay them, how to get your numbers in QuickBooks if you’re not good at math.”

In 2023, BizStarts served 521 entrepreneurs, 47 percent of whom were able to hire staff, creating 137 jobs. Ninety-five percent of the entrepreneurs were Black or Latino. Knowledgeable community volunteers provide free ongoing assistance. Some IT student consultants, for example, help set up websites for budding entrepreneurs.

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## **In 2023, BizStarts served 521 entrepreneurs, 95 percent of whom were Black or Latino.**

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Others show them how to build social media pages and provide sample posts. Volunteers at the Marquette Volunteer Legal Clinics set up LLCs.

All this support was invaluable to Ruben Gaona, executive director of My Way Out, which has been assisting justice-involved individuals with reentry into the community and workforce since 2020. After serving eight years of a 10-year federal sentence, Gaona was released in 2017. At his federal halfway house, he was told that because of his criminal conviction, the best he could hope for was a minimum-wage job – even though before being incarcerated he had served in the U.S. Navy and was a U.S. Department of Defense employee.

“I strongly believe that mistakes do not define who you are,” Gaona said. “It’s what you do afterward.”

Gaona’s “afterward” was to get a job as an employment training specialist in a reentry program with the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. But his dream was to run his own program as well as to be a motivational

speaker and consultant – a dream BizStarts helped him achieve. Mentors strengthened his computer skills, but what helped Gaona most was coaching in public speaking to overcome his natural introversion. Today, he speaks at numerous events representing My Way Out. Recently he spoke to classes at the University of Notre Dame.

“Imagine a guy coming out of prison speaking at Notre Dame!” he exclaimed.

Foundation support has been critical for BizStarts. Since 2011, the organization has received \$351,000 in Foundation grants, including one to help establish the Community Market, a retail learning lab on South First Street in Walker’s Point featuring products and services from BizStarts entrepreneurs.

“Milwaukee wouldn’t be the city it is without the Greater Milwaukee Foundation,” Snyder said. “It has been a bellringer, a guiding light leading Milwaukee in the right direction.”

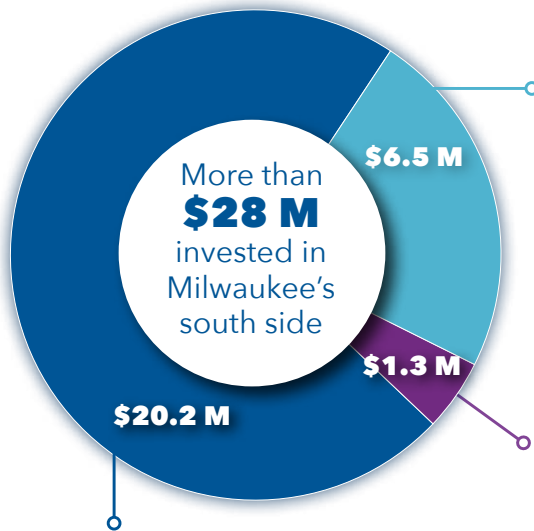


**BizStarts Community Market, 161 S. 1st Street in Milwaukee’s Walker’s Point neighborhood, sells coffee and products created by nearly two dozen local entrepreneurs.**

# South side investments

2019-2023

Over the past five years, the Greater Milwaukee Foundation has invested more than \$28 million on Milwaukee's south side, strengthening the community through a wide array of projects. These investments extend across sectors and reflect a deep commitment to fostering growth and opportunity across one of the city's most vibrant and diverse set of neighborhoods.



## Donor recommended grants

Through such tools as donor advised, designated and scholarship funds, Foundation donors can make grants to organizations and causes they choose. These grants are awarded to a specific agency at the recommendation of a donor or fund adviser.

## Board-directed grants

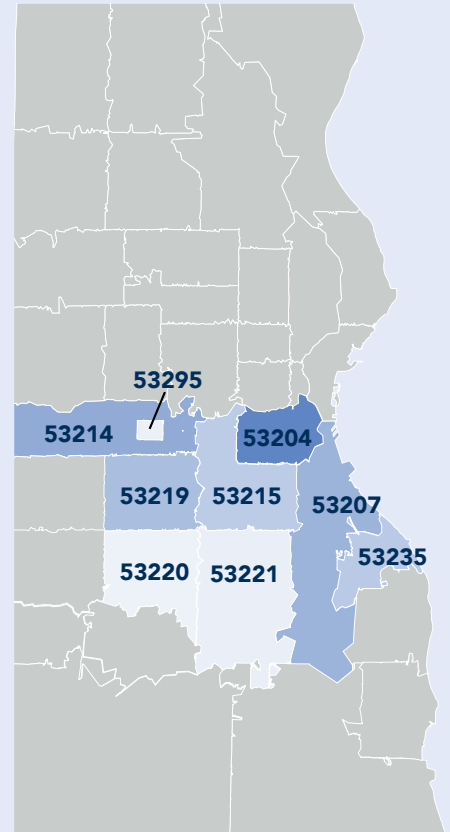
The Foundation's Board awards these strategic grants, funded through the generosity of field of interest and unrestricted funds, to address community priorities.

## Agency endowments

Agency endowment grants are the quarterly distributions that nonprofits receive from a permanently endowed or quasi-endowed fund for their organization.

## SOUTH SIDE GRANTS BY ZIP CODE

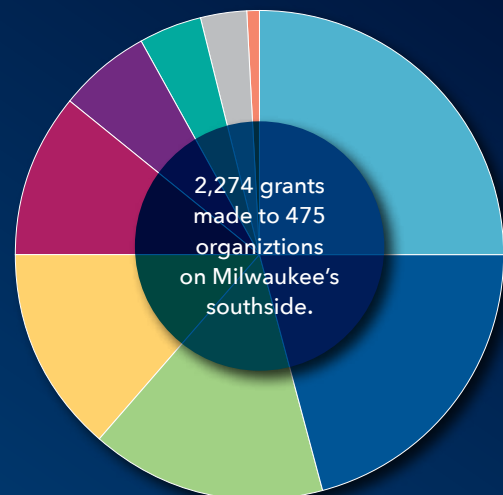
14 828



ZIP CODE	# OF GRANTS
53204	828
53207	261
53214	395
53215	204
53219	272
53220	38
53221	60
53235	208
53295	14

## Total grant amount by organization type

ORGANIZATION TYPE	TOTAL GRANT AMOUNT
Human Services	\$7,082,838
Community Development	\$5,792,896
Education	\$4,389,562
Environment	\$3,818,349
Arts And Culture	\$3,050,117
Health	\$1,714,348
Other	\$1,190,520
Children/Youth/Family	\$853,404
Employment/Training	\$200,000





# 3 WAYS

we are helping improve the health and well-being of residents across the region



## Eliminating communication and language barriers

For the thousands of people in Wisconsin who are deaf or hard of hearing, **HEAR Wisconsin** has served as a critical lifeline for nearly a century. The nonprofit provides personalized services, technology and education to help individuals eliminate communication and language barriers. With a \$35,000 grant, the agency is continuing to provide outreach to clients, 51 percent of whom are low income or from underserved communities and often have higher incidences of untreated hearing loss.



## Fulfilling basic needs for families with young children

Food, clothing and shelter are essential needs required for a high quality of life. For young families, diapers are just as critical, and yet only 50 percent of U.S. families have the adequate supply to keep their baby clean, dry and healthy. Since 2020, **Milwaukee Diaper Mission** has worked to change that reality. With a \$50,000 grant, it is continuing to distribute to distribute diapers, wipes and menstruation products to more than 20 area partner organizations that are serving Milwaukee families in need.



## Creating access to fitness opportunities for people with disabilities

Sports and recreational activities are transformative – particularly for individuals with disabilities. The **Wisconsin Adaptive Sports Association** empowers youth with disabilities to tap into their potential through physical activity programming and adaptive equipment. With its \$31,305 grant, WASA is helping low-income youth of color with physical disabilities in Milwaukee increase their access to fitness and recreation and help improve their health and quality of life.

These grantees were among the 67 organizations in greater Milwaukee that received a total of \$3.5 million from the Otto Bremer Trust this summer as part of a new pilot program. The St. Paul, Minnesota-based foundation chose the Greater Milwaukee Foundation and five other Midwest community foundations to administer and distribute grants from its Community Responsive Fund to address health and well-being, community asset building, and entrepreneurship and small business development.

“The Trust’s mission has always been to provide funding to organizations and programs that effectively address challenges and opportunities in the local community. What better way to have a deeper understanding of where those challenges are than to work with an organization like the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, which is fully integrated into the community and regions we serve,” said Frank Miley, the trust’s co-CEO and trustee.

New Foundation President and CEO Greg Wesley chats with a community member at the ThriveOn King block party. From the beginning of the ThriveOn Collaboration, a partnership between the Foundation, Medical College of Wisconsin and Royal Capital, Wesley has been deeply involved in engaging with community.



# GREG WESLEY

**is building connections to take the  
Foundation to the next level**



Wesley was one of three co-chairs for the ThriveOn Collaboration.

Greg Wesley arrived in Milwaukee in June 1997 not knowing a single soul. From Gary, Ind., Wesley had just been recruited to join a small but growing Milwaukee-based law firm after graduating from law school.

While some young lawyers dive headfirst into work during the first few years of their practice, Wesley was determined to carve out time to become involved in the community while also building a law practice. That decision was due in part to the sage advice he received from a law professor.

“He taught me lawyers have a responsibility to their community,” Wesley said. “Sustained involvement leads to a more fulfilling career and a stronger community.”

Wesley is now known as one of Milwaukee’s top 25 powerbrokers, that person to whom others turn when they need to accomplish something in the city, whether it’s a business deal, community project or fundraising effort. In August, he brought his more than a quarter century of connections, credibility and commitment to community to his new role as the Greater Milwaukee Foundation’s president and CEO, the fourth leader in its 109-year history.

“Greg cares deeply about Milwaukee and is deeply committed to Milwaukee,” said Michael Nguyen, executive director of Teach for America Milwaukee, where Wesley serves as its board chair. “You’d be hard pressed to find anyone in the city as connected, smart and strategic as Greg.”



Wesley, Halyard Park resident Cassandra Brooks and Medical College of Wisconsin President and CEO John Raymond at ThriveOn King open house event.

## CULTIVATING CLOSE CONNECTIONS

A first-generation college student, Wesley graduated from Indiana University and went to University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School in the hopes of becoming a sports agent or entering the entertainment industry. But he eventually became a litigator, falling in love with the law because it challenged his critical-thinking and problem-solving skills.

Wesley became quickly immersed in Milwaukee after he arrived, thanks in part to Marvin Pratt, a Milwaukee alderman at the time and later interim mayor who introduced him to government officials, area business leaders and neighborhood residents. Through the Milwaukee Urban League Young Professionals, Wesley got connected to other young professionals. He spent 18 years at Gonzalez Saggio & Harlan before joining the Medical College of Wisconsin in 2016 as its inaugural senior vice president of strategic alliances and business development.

**“Greg cares deeply about Milwaukee and is deeply committed to Milwaukee. You’d be hard pressed to find anyone in the city as connected, smart and strategic as Greg.”**

*Michael Nguyen, executive director of Teach for America Milwaukee*



Community leaders say Wesley has become a trusted partner because of his thoughtfulness, strong listening skills and high emotional intelligence.

Personally and professionally, Wesley has been committed to building a thriving community where business, civic, philanthropic and public policy sectors have collaborative relationships and work together to improve lives.

“He has credibility in virtually every place in the community,” said Joel Brennan, president of the Greater Milwaukee Committee, where Wesley serves on the board.

Wesley has chaired GMC’s MKE United effort since 2015 and has helped raise money for its Anti-Displacement Fund, which is housed at the Foundation and provides grants to help ensure long-time, income-eligible homeowners living in near downtown neighborhoods are not displaced due to the increasing property taxes associated with new development.

“There are plenty of places in the community where there is a trust deficit because of disinvestment and disengagement,” Brennan said. “Greg takes it personally when we don’t as a community get to where we need to be. He has taken it upon himself with other leaders to ensure we start to rebuild that trust.”

**‘A COMMUNITY GUY’**

His love for Milwaukee and its citizens lies at the heart of what he does, and his passion for helping them thrive is palpable. Community leaders said Wesley has become a trusted partner because of his thoughtfulness, astute listening skills and high emotional intelligence.

“He’s a community guy and has the pulse of what’s going on in the community,” said Barbara Wanzo, Black Arts MKE executive director. Wesley is a founding board member of the Black-led performing arts group.

Ralph Hollmon, who first met Wesley while serving as president of the Milwaukee Urban League, said he was a visionary leader who saw the potential in Bronzeville before others. As MUL’s board chair at the time, Wesley led its facilities committee in exploring options for a new building. The nonprofit relocated to its current location on North Avenue in 2006 and became a catalyst for others.

“Greg had a vision to see what others couldn’t see,” Hollmon said.

MCW President and CEO Dr. John Raymond credits Wesley as the driver in bringing MCW and the Foundation together in 2018 to form the ThriveOn Collaboration. Wesley devoted many weekdays, evenings and weekends over the long-term development of the partnership to build relationships with residents, gain support of elected officials for the concept and help recruit other tenant partners to ThriveOn King, also based in Bronzeville.

“Greg has his fingerprints on all the wonderful things that needed to happen for this dream to become a reality,” said Raymond, who acknowledged Wesley for also elevating MCW’s visibility and value in the community.

## TAKING THE FOUNDATION TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Wesley is no stranger to the Foundation, having first become exposed to its work nearly 20 years ago through his role as a trustee of the Faye McBeath Foundation. The private foundation was a co-funder with the Foundation on the Nonprofit Management Fund, and the organizations shared office space for a time.

When Wesley was recruited to join the Foundation’s Board in 2016, he said the decision was a no-brainer. He and his wife, Lisa, later became donors. When the leadership position opened in 2024, Wesley saw his wealth of connections and the Foundation’s ability



Wesley welcomed area business owners to ThriveOn King as part of the Historic King Drive BID’s Bronzeville Business Breakfast in early August.

**“Greg takes it personally when we don’t as a community get to where we need to be. He has taken it upon himself with other leaders to ensure we start to rebuild that trust.”**

*Joel Brennan, president of the Greater Milwaukee Committee*

to connect others in the community to advance common causes as “right on the mark” for another career challenge.

Foundation Board chair Mary Ellen Stanek has served with Wesley for nearly 20 years on boards including the GMC, Milwaukee World Festival and Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee. She described him as a servant leader who can “build coalitions and consensus while being able to bridge and honor differences.”

“I’m excited about what the future holds,” Stanek said.

Wesley’s familiarity with the Foundation and deep understanding of Milwaukee lessens the learning curve and enables him to hit the ground running in terms of furthering its work, partners say.

He sees the Foundation as helping change the narrative of Milwaukee, particularly through its generational commitment to racial equity and inclusion.

“This entire community is tied in together,” Wesley said. “If we don’t improve the opportunities for Black and Brown residents without it being a zero-sum game, then we’re not going to reach our full potential.”

Wesley said he is committed to the fulfillment of the Foundation’s current strategic plan, which runs through 2025. He looks forward to demonstrating the Foundation’s role in addition to that as a grantmaker, building upon its legacy and with work such as impact investing and the ThriveOn Collaboration. He also sees the potential in other creative partnerships and cross-sector cooperation to help Milwaukee remain vibrant.

“I am optimistic in the Foundation’s ability to be that convener around which other sectors rally to embrace a shared vision and align our collective strategies to serve all of Milwaukee,” Wesley said. “I believe that if we lead on big issues, we can achieve big results together.”



## FROM VISION TO VITALITY:

### **Community voices helped bring ThriveOn King to life**

More than five years ago, the Greater Milwaukee Foundation embarked upon a new collaboration with the Medical College of Wisconsin and Royal Capital with a singular vision: Creating a Milwaukee that is equitable, healthy and thriving for all.

Our plan, in addition to intentionally investing in the surrounding neighborhoods across a variety of interest areas, was to have that vision physically manifested through ThriveOn King, a 450,000-square-foot building once home to Gimbels-Schuster's Department Store.

The building was a blank canvas brimming with possibilities. Through an ongoing partnership with neighborhood residents, we've created a space together that materially addresses the community's top priorities of social cohesion, economic opportunity, housing, early childhood education and health and wellness. The change is catalytic and tangible today.



## SOCIAL COHESION

After more than 50 years since it was home to one of the area's largest department stores, the restored building has become a destination once again in Milwaukee's Historic King Drive District. Gathering spaces throughout the first floor were made for all to enjoy – whether for an awards luncheon, community baby shower, business breakfast or neighborhood meeting. African American community leaders will receive a lasting tribute through the naming of public spaces by generous donors. A variety of artwork from more than 20 Milwaukee artists creates a unique sense of place, celebrating the rich history as well as the bright future of Bronzeville.

*Perseverance of Legacy: Milwaukee Bronzeville and Beyond* by Brad Anthony Bernard



## ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Residents envisioned the opportunity for ThriveOn King to invest in the economic well-being of the community. In addition to relocating its headquarters to the building, the Foundation made \$11.5 million in impact investments in the development, and, together with donor support, helped fund many aspects of project. Between the Foundation, MCW and first floor occupants, in total more than 340 people work in the building. On the first floor, JobsWork MKE, a nonprofit focused on workforce development, connects individuals to jobs and helps adults overcome barriers to gainful employment, assisting them with financial planning, job advancement, spiritual support and more.

## HOUSING

The Bronzeville area has a rich history of homeownership and long-term residents who wish to remain a part of the fabric of the community. The Residences at ThriveOn King offers opportunities to do so. Ninety affordable and market-rate apartments are under construction, 27 of which have been set aside for adults 55 and older. Additional units are available for students in MCW's Health Equity Scholars Program, which aims to address health and health care disparities in Wisconsin.



## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

About half of Milwaukee's children lack access to quality, affordable early childhood care and education. Neighborhood residents expressed the need in particular for better educational options for infants and toddlers. ThriveOn Collaboration selected 5-star rated Malaika Early Learning Center as the flagship provider for ThriveOn King, offering 70 spots for children ages 6 weeks to 5 years. The center also will serve as a teaching resource, offering training sessions to help other centers and educators improve safety practices and create stimulating environments for young learners.







## HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Access to nutritious food and access to jobs consistently ranked among neighbors' highest identified priorities during our visioning process and ongoing engagement. Two anchor tenants are fulfilling those needs. Kinship Café, run by Kinship Community Food Center, brings healthy food options and an innovative workforce training program for residents encountering barriers to employment. Versiti is connecting with a diverse community on a deeper level through its space. It collects blood donations, provides access to job skill training and employment opportunities and educates about sickle cell disease and other diseases affecting communities of color.

# 2024 greater together AWARDS

The Greater Together Awards shine a spotlight on individuals who are shaping a more inclusive and vibrant Milwaukee. Each year, these prestigious awards recognize those who dedicate their time, talent, treasure and ties to building a stronger, more equitable community for all. Through their efforts, Milwaukee continues to grow as a place where everyone can thrive.



## **Ellen Gilligan Leadership in Racial Equity and Social Justice Award**

*Since 2019, this award has honored those who have worked to make our region welcoming and inclusive for all.*

### **BRAD PRUITT**

Brad Pruitt, a filmmaker, educator and arts advocate, has made it his life's work to preserve the mission and vision of Dr. James Cameron to build public awareness of the harmful legacies of slavery and promote racial repair, reconciliation and healing. In doing so, he has shepherded the reemergence of America's Black Holocaust Museum, a cultural institution that explores Black history from slavery to today. Under his leadership, ABHM grew its virtual and physical presence, reopening in 2022 after a 14-year hiatus, and continues to create space for the difficult conversations that our community and country need to have about American history.

**"It is humbling to be a part of this legacy and this kind of exploration of our history together."**

## **Doug Jansson Leadership Award**

*Since 2011, this award has honored passionate and inspirational nonprofit leaders in greater Milwaukee*

### **DAMIAN BUCHMAN**

Damian Buchman is unstoppable in his quest to make recreational spaces more accessible for all in our community. For nearly 20 years, Buchman has worked tirelessly to remove barriers within the community that prevent people with disabilities from being able to participate in physical activity and recreational opportunities. Within the past decade alone, Buchman and his nonprofit, The Ability Center, have made Bradford Beach the most accessible beach in America, and it is in the midst of transforming an 18-acre park in Wauwatosa into America's most inclusive park.

**"My goal is to help people live a higher quality of life in a new normal. It makes it a blessing and a joy to help someone live a better life."**



### Frank Kirkpatrick Award

*Since 1988, this award has honored individuals whose efforts helped change Milwaukee's built environment.*

## NICOLE ROBBINS

Nicole Robbins has maintained a lifelong passion for real estate. As executive director of the Martin Luther King Economic Development Corporation, she has channeled that passion to bring to fruition affordable housing and commercial projects that have continued the revitalization along Milwaukee's King Drive corridor. Robbins is committed to fostering generational wealth and making housing more affordable and attainable for individuals, particularly for Black and Brown communities. She collaborates with minority developers to expand development in Milwaukee's Harambee neighborhood, where her family has deep roots.

**"The end game [with real estate] is really to help people have stability and prosperity in their life. There is no better way to help people than providing them with housing and business opportunities."**

### William C. Frye Award

*First bestowed in 1956, this award honors individuals who have contributed their time, efforts or talents to make Milwaukee a better community.*

## JOHN SCHLIFSKE


As chairman and CEO of Northwestern Mutual, John Schlifske has had great influence in the local community in areas ranging from business to technology to education. Over the past 14 years, he has overseen the Fortune 500 company's growth into a financial powerhouse and helped foster its community involvement by investing more than \$400 million in Milwaukee. Schlifske's leadership has helped the company accelerate and enhance efforts to support education for Milwaukee's youth, revitalize local and disadvantaged neighborhoods and support nonprofits that help our city flourish as a great destination to live and work.

**"I hope when I retire that there will be some evidence that Milwaukee is a slightly better place because I got involved. That our hometown is even more livable for generations to come."**



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Warm Wishes  
*for a joyful holiday season  
and a happy new year!*

