

# Case Study

## Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque

BY CYNTHIA M. GIBSON

In 2003, the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque (CFGD) opened its doors with one employee who had never run a community foundation but had a big idea. That big idea was community engagement.

Nancy Van Milligen's commitment to community engagement stemmed from her community development experience as chair of the Iowa State Commission on Volunteerism and regional director of the state's foster care review system. That work, along with her political science background, reinforced her belief that "democracy is of the people, and civic engagement is central to that process." To Van Milligen, that meant "providing opportunities for any and all citizens who want to participate to be able to come to the table, share their ideas, and be part of the community."

Van Milligen believed that the best way to be "value-added as a new community organization" was through community engagement. What she didn't know at the time was that this approach was somewhat new to the community foundation field, which had begun experimenting with a "community leadership" model, at the heart of which was community engagement.

### Community Engagement through Visioning

In 2005, Van Milligen got the chance to see what this model looked like when she attended a meeting of the River Partnership of Community Foundations. Hosted by the Funders Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities, the meeting featured a presentation describing one Kentucky city's effort to bring community stakeholders together to participate in a "visioning" event. The event focused on getting consensus among participants on the top issues facing the community and devising action plans to address them.

Van Milligen realized that this could be a powerful way to put CFGD on the map, not only in terms of name recognition but also in demonstrating its potential to serve as a results-oriented change maker—two factors that would be essential to growing the foundation. Working with a team of committed volunteers, Van Milligen began planning a process through which the CFGD would bring together people from all parts of the community for a visioning initiative. The goal: to engage tristate area citizens in an open, all-inclusive discussion to develop a variety of ideas for the future of Dubuque.

Working with a steering committee of nine committed volunteers, Van Milligen spent four months planning "Envision 2010," including reaching out to a diverse group of stakeholders and developing marketing materials. Encouraging the participation of the people beyond the "usual suspects—usually older, white folks," says Van Milligen—was particularly challenging. "We had to be very intentional in bringing in disenfranchised neighbors and populations that were hard to reach."

To do that, the foundation had volunteers spread out across the community to meet with institutions that could help pull diverse groups of people into the process, including college students, labor unions, churches, and community centers. "We sponsored events like a 'Night of Ideas,'" Van Milligen says, "where we'd go out into neighborhoods and set up a booth to invite people to come talk to us. We wanted it to be neighbors talking to neighbors—not community leaders working with other community leaders." CFGD also partnered with several local media outlets that would create constant noise about Envision and reach a broader audience of potential community participants.

The strategy worked. In July 2005, the CFGD, along with the Chamber of Commerce, which agreed to serve as cosponsor, officially launched the visioning

process at a breakfast attended by more than four hundred people—about two hundred more than had responded. All attendees received a toolkit calling on residents to take three steps: Gather a group. Brainstorm. And submit your ideas. The attendees also took part in a walk-through of the proposed visioning process and left, Van Milligen claims, “empowered to envision the future with their friends and neighbors.”

These gatherings took a lot of very intentional “boots-on-the-ground work,” Van Milligen observes. There were also some bumps in the road. “We didn’t have the skill set to handle some of the situations that came up. When you’re used to convening the same people, you’re used to their behaviors and stuff. But when you go into a neighborhood with a different culture, it’s very different.”

She points to one meeting, early in the process, when people began yelling at each other. “They felt that the whole thing was a joke—that the decisions had already been made, and nobody cared what they thought. We stepped back and said, ‘We never would’ve guessed that’s what you thought. Tell us more. What can we do differently? How can we make your voice more welcome? Let’s talk about it.’ And we wrote everything down on a flip chart.” These kinds of experiences, Van Milligen says, led to several lessons learned—among them that, going forward the foundation “would always try to send out representatives who had the relational and cultural skills needed to do this work well.”

During the next six months, hundreds of Dubuque residents met in gatherings large and small to eventually generate more than 2,332 ideas. Next, project organizers solicited and received applications from more than seventy people to participate on a twenty-one-member selection committee charged with winnowing this list to ten ideas that would have the most positive impact on the future of the greater Dubuque area. To get to that goal, community members were invited to a series of six town hall meetings where they used electronic keypads to vote for their favorite ideas. This list of thirty was then presented to residents through a telephone poll survey that provided feedback to the committee, which, in turn, selected the final top ten ideas. Among the ideas were making Dubuque a wireless city, build-

ing a new community health center, renovating the local library, and revitalizing the warehouse district. Together, these ideas became a new community road map, which was formally presented at a festive event and then handed off to the community to decide how to move forward. Following the announcement of the final ten ideas, the steering committee hosted the last community meeting where participants gathered into ten self-selected groups with each group addressing one idea. After the meeting, community groups of public, private, and nonprofit representatives met monthly to become owners of the ideas and help them become reality. Their commitment and energy to the process led to a striking achievement: In just two years, every one of the ten ideas had come to fruition in one way or another—often, very close to what was envisioned.

Among those ideas was a new community health center. This dream had been a “long time in the making,” Van Milligen says, noting that a “group of us had been working on it since 1999. We’d submitted three federal grant proposals and had no success.” That all changed the day after the top ten ideas were announced, when a local business leader called the foundation’s board chair saying he would commit \$1.3 million for an endowment for the community health center. That led to another gift of \$500,000 from a local casino, a \$1.3 million match from the state, and recurring federal funding for operations. Today, the health center is housed in a restored historical warehouse in a low-income neighborhood and serves more than 1,200 patients monthly.

### Issue-Related Community Engagement Projects

Since Envision, the CFGD has focused more on issue-related engagement projects, including DBQ 2.0—Inspiring Sustainability, which emerged out of a presentation Van Milligen attended to explore how Dubuque could become an international model for IBM’s “Smarter City” initiative. A new employer in the city, IBM wanted to put meters in every residents’ basement that would provide data about each household’s energy usage. The goal was to use data to help reduce people’s water, electric, and gas usage.

Although the idea made sense, Van Milligen and her colleagues were skeptical that simply providing information to people would lead to concrete

behavioral changes (noting, she says, “that if this were true, we’d all quit smoking and exercise every day”). They believed that success would hinge on a process that engaged and inspired the community to participate. Other funders agreed, including the State Office of Energy Independence and the electric utility company, which supported the CFGD’s efforts to put together a community engagement plan around promoting the city’s eleven principles of sustainability. It also provided the match for a Knight Foundation Community Challenge grant as well as a partnership with the city and the Chamber of Commerce.

There were several components to the effort, including a Web site that provided a carbon footprint tracking tool and portal to track energy usage, community cafés that encouraged casual conversations in places “where people are at,” information about adopting sustainable practices to save money and resources, and challenge games offering prizes. In addition to engaging people around this issue, these efforts also helped residents save money and resources as well as connect them to the community foundation.

### Results and Lessons Learned

The CFGD-facilitated community visioning process has since led to development or completion of all ten of the top community-identified priorities. But the initiative also led to less tangible, but equally important, results illustrating the impact community engagement can have. “In particular, it strengthened our reputation as a knowledge broker and community leader,” Van Milligen observes. “These days, we’re at the table when there are community conversations and have relationships with the city, school districts, county, higher education, Chamber of Commerce, and many nonprofits. Essentially, this work put our community foundation on the map.”

The CFGD also has been able to encourage more citizen participation, Van Milligen says, because it “develops leadership—not only in the community but also in our organization.” She adds: “People call us now and say, ‘I’ve never been on a committee, but I want to be involved.’ One of the exciting results is that so many more young people are engaged in the community. A young professionals group, in

fact, started up even though that wasn’t one of the identified outcomes.”

In short, while the ten ideas were important to the CFGD, what was more important, says Van Milligen, “was how many people felt they now had a voice and wanted to continue to be involved and how many organizations now wanted to work together.” Many participants, in fact, joined forces to apply for additional grants to support the work, and, in 2007 and in 2012, Dubuque received an All-America City Award. The foundation has also been recognized five times for its work in creating one of America’s “100 Best Communities for Young People,” an award issued annually by America’s Promise Alliance.

Perhaps the most striking outcome, Van Milligen adds, has been how community engagement has increased the involvement of donors. Eight of the ten community ideas now, for example, have endowment funds at the CFGD, and donor outreach is built into all the foundation’s community engagement work. “I find that the donors who are engaged in our work are extremely committed to it,” Van Milligen says. “So we keep them in the loop constantly about what’s going on—almost every two weeks, they hear from us or are involved in something we are doing.” The foundation has been asked by an increasing number of community foundations and other organizations in several other cities to help them implement their own community engagement processes.

### Roles

The CFGD wears several hats, but Van Milligen is fond of citing three roles the foundation plays: “We’re a vehicle for philanthropy, we’re a grant maker, and we strengthen community leadership through our convenings and ability to make things happen.” The CFGD, in fact, never refers to what it does as “funding” or its staff as “funders” because it provides more than grants. “Our best days are when our three roles are integrated—when our donors are supporting our community leadership work and our grant making is aligned with that work,” Van Milligen notes. “We talk to our donors about building a vibrant culture—and we’ve found they get excited by and donate to it. When we now meet with donors, we start out by asking them about their

values and vision for the community. Most of the time, they'll mention something that the foundation is already working on, so it's a wonderful opportunity to get them engaged, not only financially, but in other ways."

#### Lessons Learned

**Define the Process Up Front and Keep It Simple and Fun.** The CFGD's model sticks with the basics with an eye toward bringing about changes in organizational practice and individual behaviors. Van Milligen explains: "We look to build awareness of the issue and facilitate a process in which participants can shape the vision. We then move toward transformation and growth. At most of our events, we post the community's goals and the questions we use to get there, for example: Where are we now and where do we want to go? What do I know and what do I need to know? What do I want to change? What's next?" She adds: "It's important to be intentional about making sure every meeting is time limited, purposeful, lively, and entertaining. People have to be able to trust that if they show up, someone's taking care of the details, and there is going to be a good outcome."

**Threefold Key to Quality Community Engagement: Strong Partnerships, Strong Facilitation, and Strong Data.** Of particular importance, Van Milligen notes, is "building strong, ongoing relationships with people that can help you move the needle." She says she's surprised by "community foundations that haven't met the mayor or superintendent or gone to lunch with their economic development person."

**Community Engagement: Both a Means to Achieve Specific Goals and an End unto Itself.** In response to a common question—whether community engagement is a vehicle to achieve a specific goal (e.g., improving schools) or whether it can be an end unto itself (a process that strengthens community's civic capacity)—the CFGD views it as both. "Our visioning process was not only about achieving the top ten goals the community identified but also about strengthening residents' ability to participate in things, no matter what the issue," says Van Milligen.

Yet there are differences in approach, depending on the focus. The visioning process, she says, was

"more straightforward than issue-related engagement because we were truly more of a facilitator and had no agenda. When you get into issues, it becomes more complex. It's harder to keep it simple because data and facts need to be shared, and people's values and opinions become a bigger part of the mix." As a result, Van Milligen says, "You have to strive to be politically neutral so that you can be seen as truly inclusive. So, for example, instead of talking about 'climate change' or 'global warming' in the 2.0 work, we instead talk about what's in it for people who reduce their energy use."

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**Community Engagement: Labor-Intensive and Requires Deeply Committed Staff, Trained Facilitators, and Solid Process.** "This work isn't for the weak of heart," Van Milligen says. "It's difficult to go from being a charitable bank account to a community engagement organization. But it can be done. It's really important to have the right staff in place. They have to be smart at building relationships, articulate and well respected in the community. And everyone on staff, as well as volunteers and interns, should have those qualities."

**Engage Your Board.** When Van Milligen started, the foundation board was still focused on raising a large pool of money to invest in the community so she encouraged them to think about the CFGD as a community development organization. "I didn't want to measure our impact by the amount of money we have, but rather, by the amount of community impact we were having," she says. Van Milligen prepared a presentation for the board illustrating what this might look like, and increasingly, board members became more excited by the idea and gave her "enough rope to forge ahead." Once the initiative started generating results, board members became more convinced that the foundation was "going to be an entrepreneurial organization that

engages citizens and supports efforts that will have a deeper and broader impact on the community.”

**Data and Research Are Important—but Not Everything.**

After the Envision process, Van Milligen was on a panel talking about community engagement with two urban planners who were critical of the CFGD’s process. “They felt we hadn’t done enough research and assessment—something they’d spent a lot of time on but had ended up being over budget and not keeping to their timeline. I said, ‘We were on budget, we met our timeline, and our results were incredible.’ The lesson is, despite people who may try to make it complicated, simple is often good in this work. This is about meeting people where they’re at. It’s not an academic exercise.”

That doesn’t mean that the foundation ignores data and research. To the contrary, Van Milligen says, “We’ve begun to focus more on data. We’re working with the University of Iowa, for example, on various projects, and we’ve just created an institute at the foundation that will house a faculty member from the university. That person will work with us on our projects, partner with other colleges in the area, manage what we’re learning, and generate new research.” The foundation has also used existing data at the county and state level for a project to assess how young people were faring in the community across various indicators. Nonprofits, Van Milligen says, “loved this project because the published data helped them tell their story better, and others use it to help write a grant application.”

**Show People You Want to Be a Partner, Not a Parent.**

Van Milligen advises community foundations to talk less and listen more. “Truly believe in engaging the community and listening to what they have to say. You can’t have already decided the outcomes. You’re a facilitator. As soon as you start determining the results, it’s no longer a community engagement process.”

**Ask Whether You’re Being as Inclusive as Possible.**

Van Milligen points to the 2.0 project as an example: “We thought that by making sure all the participants had computers, we were being inclusive. But we didn’t check to see if they knew how to use them.” To be truly inclusive, “you need to commit the extra effort and resources to reach out in more

effective ways. And those efforts need to be embedded throughout the whole process. You constantly have to ask yourselves: What are we doing to be inclusive? Are we successful? What else could we do?”

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**Role of Community Foundations Depends on Circumstances.**

Van Milligen sees community foundations as uniquely suited for community engagement work, if they “go in with the right attitude and know who they are, what they want to be, and what they want their outcomes to be.” It’s equally important to realize that the community foundation is usually only one of many institutions that can do this work; others include local Chambers of Commerce, non-profit associations, community development corporations, schools, and many more. “Work to understand the community power structure and how you align yourself with partners. Always think about ‘are we the best group to do this? Who should be at the table? Who should take credit for it? Who’s the face of it?’”

**Moving Forward: The Next Decade**

The CFGD of today is a much different organization from what it was a decade ago when it was created. But it continues to see community engagement as central to everything it does because of its ability to scale the foundation’s impact in a way that goes far beyond its ability to just write a check. “We’re only ten years old, and we’ve achieved incredible impact,” says Van Milligen. Currently, CFGD is immersed in several activities that go beyond grant making. Among these are providing a new conference meeting space for local nonprofits; a campaign to ensure that all children in the community have a healthy start; an initiative that engages residents around improving school readiness and reading achievement; and a community awareness campaign promoting civility and inclusivity.

Community engagement has also prompted a complete overhauling of the foundation’s grant-making

process. “We moved from being a responsive to a proactive and engaged grant maker. We stay aware of what the issues and needs are in our community. And we know how to make our resources go further,” Van Milligen observes. Foundation staff—which now number seventeen, including volunteers—remain humble, however, about their role as only one of many stakeholders in the community mix. “We talk about humility and

serving the community and its people. We hope to be a healthy organization supporting healthy communities.”

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