



# Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque

Case Study | August 2023

**CFLeads**

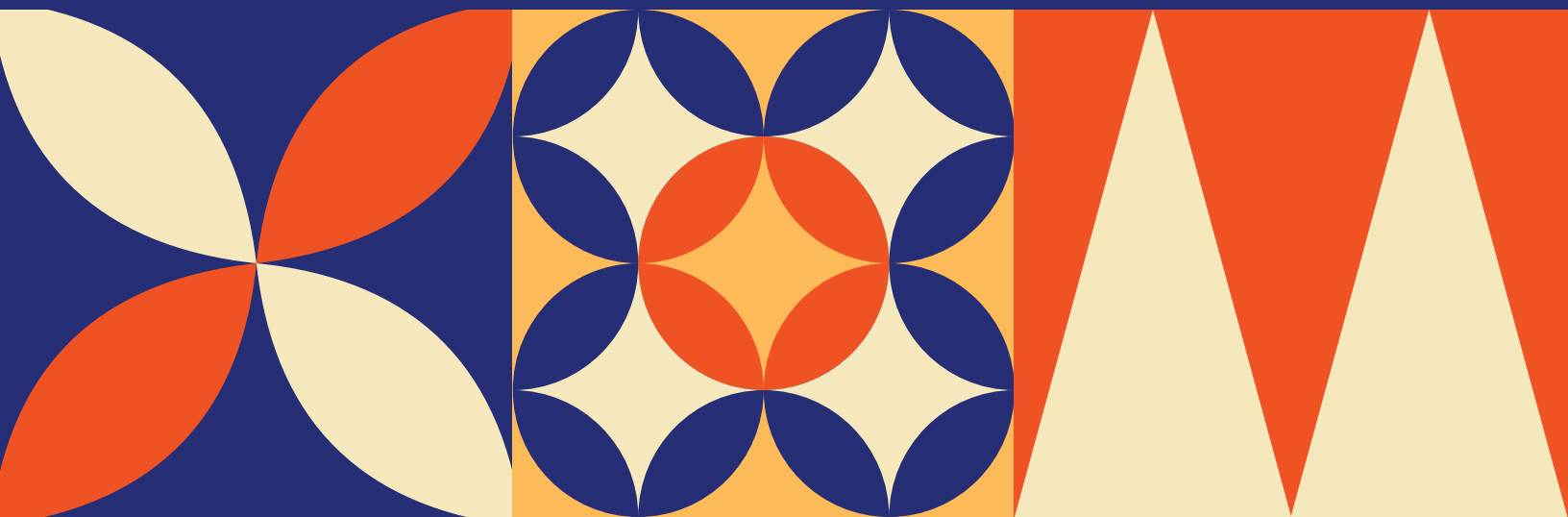
Community Foundations  
Leading Change

**PUBLIC  
EQUITY  
GROUP**



**The Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque began to explore equity more deeply as a result of a predicament in the early 2010s: an influx of diverse residents exposed disparities in access to healthcare and other community resources, and gave rise to discrimination.**

**While addressing these issues remains a work in progress, the Foundation has made major strides through such initiatives as Inclusive Dubuque, a network of partners responding to equity challenges; the Community Equity Profile; the Dubuque College Access Network; “Advancing Racial Equity” training sessions for local leaders; and facilitated racial healing conversations.**



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# Introduction

As its population began to diversify in recent years, the city of Dubuque, Iowa, has had to confront growing challenges to the traditions and assumptions of its historically White population, of primarily Irish and German descent. When IBM opened an office in Dubuque that drew 1,100 employees from backgrounds outside of the traditional population, issues of discrimination and unequal access to healthcare and other community resources for people of color came to the fore. Both the staff and board of the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque needed outside help to address these pressing problems. From this initial effort to deal with an equity crisis grew a series of initiatives to address racism and diversity, including “Inclusive Dubuque,” a peer-learning network of partners responding to equity challenges; the Foundation’s Community Equity Profile, which illustrates how different people are affected by housing, education, and healthcare systems; and racial healing conversations, which seek to clarify the concept of equity versus equality, and share examples of how policies and practices impact people based on race.

The Community Foundation has also worked to change hearts, minds, and traditions within its own organizational structure and board of directors. Along with many successes from its equity efforts in recent years, the Community Foundation still faces equity challenges, including making people of color comfortable in traditional meeting venues and bringing diversity to the decision-making process.

The Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque was founded in 2003. Over the past twenty years, under the leadership of President and CEO Nancy Van Milligen, the Foundation has grown to support over 300 nonprofit partners with the help of over 4,000 donors. In 2021, the Foundation had total assets of \$141 million (including \$20 million in gifts received that year), awarded 2,476 grants for a total of \$6.4 million, and had awarded a total of \$60 million since its inception.<sup>1</sup>

  
Community Foundation  
of Greater Dubuque

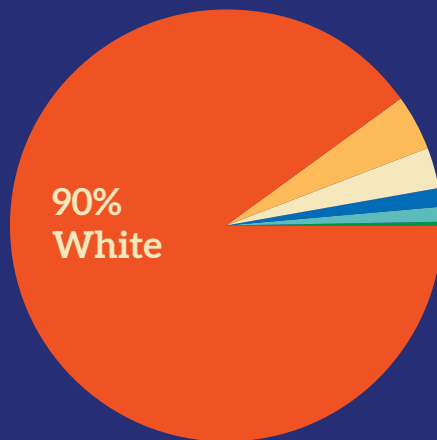
Founded  
**1833**

The oldest city in Iowa sits on the western bank of the Mississippi River.

**7** Counties

**200,000**

People<sup>2</sup> and 60,000 people live in the metropolitan area.



**4% Black**

**3% Mixed race**

**1.5% Asian**

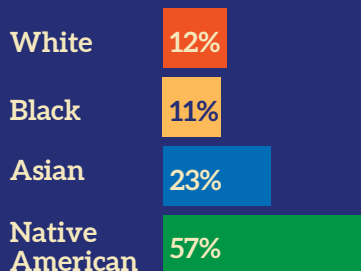
**1 % Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander**

*(Dubuque has the sixth-largest population of Marshall Islanders in the continental United States)*

**.27% Native American**

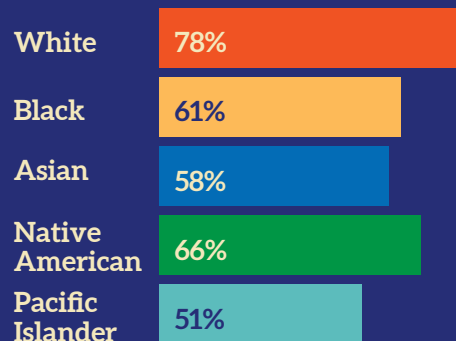
**There are large disparities in economic and educational outcomes between these groups.**

### Poverty Rate



*Disproportionately high among Pacific Islanders*

### High School Graduates



College graduation rates are low but also unequal, with 27 percent of Whites, 21 percent of Asians, and just 7 percent of Blacks obtaining a Bachelor's degree.<sup>3</sup>

# Equity Comes to the Fore in Dubuque

In 2011, IBM opened a Dubuque office, staffed by 1,100 employees of diverse backgrounds. Soon thereafter IBM leaders approached the City of Dubuque, the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, and other community leaders with a problem.

*“They said, ‘our minority employees are not being treated well in the community, there have been horrific displays of racism—we might leave,’” explains Nancy Van Milligen.*

People of varying backgrounds were having trouble accessing needed services and connecting to parts of the community, neighborhoods were experiencing struggles related to demographic changes, and businesses were reporting difficulty attracting and retaining a diverse workforce.

Racism was not a new problem in Dubuque. “We weren’t shocked but we were surprised with the level it had gotten to,” Van Milligen continues. “In the 1990s, there were cross burnings in Dubuque. We are a homogeneous, traditional, White, Irish, German community.” To address the problem that

IBM brought to the table, the Foundation brought in a consultant to help identify the most serious problems of equity and racism across sectors in Dubuque. “Community leaders [involved in these discussions] were uncomfortable about language around equity and inclusion.” One participant suggested a slogan of “Everybody’s neighborhood” as a solution but the Foundation stood its ground and insisted on identifying the problem by name. This was the beginning of “Inclusive Dubuque,” a peer-learning network of partners formed in 2012 to respond to challenges related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.<sup>4</sup>

*It was not an easy start, according to Van Milligen: “It took community leaders two years to come to an agreement on what the focus of Inclusive Dubuque should be, what resources were available, and where gaps existed.” But once launched, “We had people come every month from all sectors—religions, business, neighborhoods, nonprofits, citizens—to learn how to be an inclusive and equitable community.”*





Over the past ten years, Inclusive Dubuque has incorporated perspectives from over 2,500 people into a Community Equity Profile identifying residents' diverse experiences and needs; brought together sector groups with over 90 community members to address systemic challenges tied to health, education, transportation, neighborhoods, economic well-being, and arts and culture; assembled the Business Leader Equity Cohort for local executives to build a diverse and inclusive workforce; provided diversity, equity, and inclusion workshops for nonprofit, civic, and business professionals; sponsored and organized public events to nurture a community-wide culture of inclusion; and published the Dubuque Cultural Resource Guide to help residents find businesses and services catering to unique racial, cultural, and ethnic needs.<sup>5</sup>

Anderson Sainci, Director of the Office of Shared Prosperity and Neighborhood Support at the City of Dubuque, which works closely with the Community Foundation, puts equity issues in Dubuque in perspective and explains his approach: "Dubuque experiences a lot of the challenges communities face when we talk about inequities. When we talk about income, unemployment, healthcare ... When we talk about any system in America, Dubuque has the same if not higher disparities. We look at the census and there are a lot of challenges and opportunities to improve those collectively, to share resources and to share power."

**“ You have people who knew, people who didn't know, and people who didn't want to know. And you have people who have been living this for centuries and say yes, we have been trying to tell you and nothing has been done.”**

**Anderson Sainci**

*Director of the Office of Shared Prosperity and Neighborhood Support  
at the City of Dubuque, on challenges to equity work*

# The Community Equity Profile

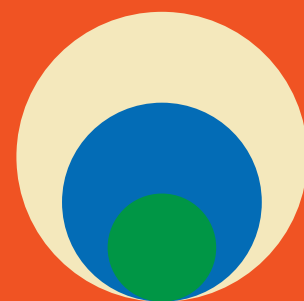
Beginning in 2015, the Foundation took the issue of equity a step further: it began compiling a Community Equity Profile, which “provides information on how all people in the community are affected by various systems, such as housing, education and health care.” It also serves as an information resource for leaders, community members, and policymakers and is a guide for creating an action plan to support “Dubuque’s growth as an equitable and inclusive community.” The Community Equity Profile process takes place over a seven-month period and focuses on seven sectors (housing, workforce and economic well-being, education, health and wellness, arts and culture, safe neighborhoods, and transportation).<sup>6</sup>

Each month the Community Foundation chooses one sector and releases data on how equity figures into that sector. For example, during the month on education, the Foundation releases

data, hosts a community panel with experts on education, carries out an online survey, and then deploys trained facilitators to facilitate smaller conversations on equity and education throughout the community. At the end of the month, the Foundation consolidates the data into a “snapshot” and publishes it in the local newspaper (the Dubuque [Telegraph Herald](#)).

Anderson Sainci of the City of Dubuque explains the function of the Community Equity Profile: “We bring residents to hear the challenges in our community. They disaggregate the data with people who experience those problems and live there.” This strategy for reaching out enables broader community conversations and helps the Community Equity Profile team facilitate more micro community conversations that in turn produce valuable data and testimonials.

**In 2015** the Community Equity Profile revealed that there were no Black students in the city’s ninth-grade algebra classes. “The school district was amazed,” reports Nancy Van Milligen. “The superintendent did some research and found out it wasn’t just test scores but also teacher attitudes.” This resulted in teaching teachers about diversity, culture, and cultural competence. The school board began disaggregating data by race for the first time. In examining all seven sectors, awareness of the data motivated people to change policies, practices, and behaviors. Mary Jo Jean-Francois, the Foundation’s Vice President of Community Impact, weighs in: “The consequence [of having no Black students in nine-grade algebra classes] was that it didn’t set kids up well if they wanted to go to college after high school, because you need algebra.” Now, according to Jean-Francois, there is more demographic parity across subjects within Dubuque schools.





To compile a 2023 Community Equity Profile summarizing all seven sectors, the Community Foundation held seven panel discussions for 525 participants in partnership with TH media; 40 community conversations with 400 attendees; and completed 300 surveys. Some of the findings include the following:

**50%** In Dubuque, some 50% of Black households spend over 50% of their annual income on housing

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**40%** About 40% of survey respondents report having experienced bias, discrimination or exclusion related to employment

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**64%** While 64% of all Dubuque Community School District students are reading at grade-level, this statistic is 46% for students of low socio-economic status, 32% for Black students, and 11% for Pacific Islanders

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**9%** Fewer than 9% of survey respondents felt that their cultural traditions and celebrations were accepted in Dubuque

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**16.5** Black people in Dubuque are 16.5 times more likely to be identified as an offender in a violent crime than White people<sup>7</sup>

# Equity in Black and White: Key Publications

The Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque has produced a number of publications either reporting on equity initiatives or intended to serve as tools for others to implement equity activities. In addition to a long-running newsletter that often addresses equity issues and informed this case study, in 2019 the Foundation published a report entitled “Advancing Equity: Community Efforts and Outcomes.” This publication details the Foundation’s equity activities in the area of government, non-profits, education, the private sector, and faith-based organizations for both the “historical” period of 2014-2016 and the more recent timeline of 2017-2019, including such efforts as instituting new reporting forms and beginning work with grant and contract recipients to apply an equity lens to their work; conducting

monthly diversity and inclusion training for staff members; hosting the inaugural Student of Color Leaders Luncheon at Loras College with the University of Dubuque, Clarke University, and the Greater Dubuque Development Corporation; and helping Dubuque Main Street target chamber minority-owned business program participants to fill available space on Dubuque’s Central Avenue corridor.<sup>8</sup>

The Foundation’s DEI Toolkit, produced in 2020-2021, is a collection of resources and learned tools used in internal DEI workshops, and is intended to help partner organizations deal with topics such as systemic racism, LGBTQ+ issues, terminology, data, local populations and programs, and disability inclusion in the workplace.<sup>9</sup>



# Equity Work Continues

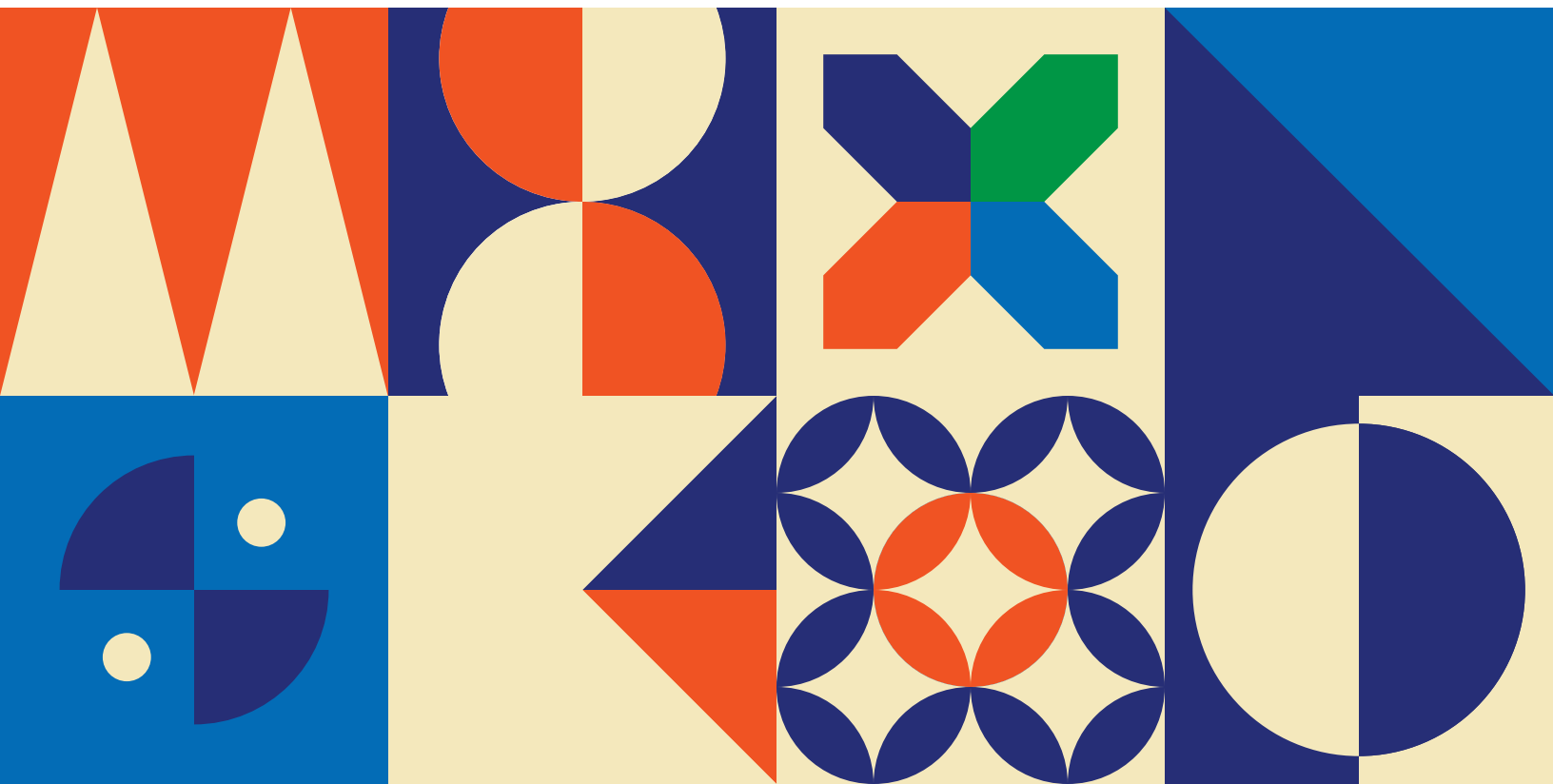
Still, as Jean-Francois points out, the Foundation's work on equity isn't done:

*"We know from our data that 70% of our Black students and 88% of our Marshallese population are not reading at their grade level by third grade."*

This trend has led the Foundation to address "summer learning loss" through Summer Academies, typically six-week learning programs that target literacy but also engage children in summer learning through activities in music and science, outdoor games, and field trips. Program data shows that Summer Academies have had a major impact in developing or maintaining students' reading skills.<sup>10</sup> But there are challenges even to implementing programs as clearly beneficial as the Summer Academies:

*"Working with partners to collect the data is challenging," Jean-Francois explains. "I think partners feel like we are watching over them. We are trying to find a way to do that better."*

Another initiative, the Dubuque College Access Network, convenes leaders from areas including education, government, nonprofits, and business to forge an understanding of the educational landscape for Dubuque's high school and college-bound youth. The goal is to "identify and create opportunities that support students who face hurdles to realizing their dreams of enrolling in college or a career training program." Accomplishments of the network have included mini-grants issued to support first-generation students, free ACT preparation courses, a panel discussion for high school students featuring first-generation college students answering questions and sharing their stories, and a \$50,000 grant from Iowa College Aid to support college access for students who face barriers to continuing their education after high school.<sup>11</sup>



# Capacity-Building in the Dubuque Community

By 2018, the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque was attempting to integrate principles of equity more broadly into the Dubuque community through capacity-building initiatives. That was the year that the Foundation teamed up with Race Forward to hold its first racial equity training for representatives from 20 Dubuque non-profit organizations. “Advancing Racial Equity” was a series of training sessions intended to encourage leaders from the civic, nonprofit, and business sectors to build skills to address structural racism and advance racial equity. The training was centered around a racial equity tool that participants could apply to any decision-making process with the goal of advancing equity through community engagement strategies and communication about race. Following each training session, participants received homework assignments that included researching the history of racial groups in the region and developing racial equity statements for their organization. The second session included time for each nonprofit to apply the racial equity tool to a project relevant to their own work. The final two sessions allowed participants to hone their equity skills and begin building a racial equity action plan for their organization. The training inspired people like Carol Gebhart, Executive Director of Opening Doors, an organization assisting women and children experiencing homelessness, to adapt their programming to the needs of a group of culturally diverse people. Participants such as Marie Duster, an Education Specialist at Mercy Medical Center, and Celena Vesely, the Chair of Mercy’s Diversity and Inclusion Council, used the Advancing Racial Equity training as a springboard for the development of a plan to reach out to a Marshallese women’s group and discuss possible

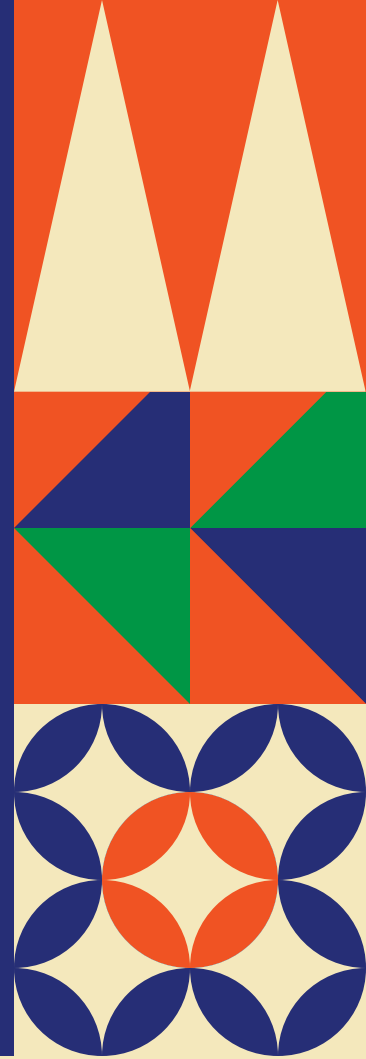
racial barriers that might impede the employment application process, employment orientation process, and employee retention.<sup>12</sup>

Also in 2018, the Community Foundation launched an eight-month peer-learning workshop series called “Best Practices in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.” The workshops aimed to “empower individuals, businesses, nonprofits and other organizations to create pathways that enhance and improve self-awareness, recruitment, retention and workplace culture.” At the same time, the Foundation established the Business Leader Equity Cohort, a group of local business executives who began regular meetings “to share experiences and learn best practices for creating a culture of diversity, equity and inclusion across their organizations,” exploring issues ranging from hiring to customer relations.<sup>13</sup>

Community activist Art Roche, who has focused his efforts especially on the Marshall Island and Guatemalan populations of Dubuque, has been working with the Foundation to facilitate equity conversations for several years. He explains how these conversations can engender change: “Someone was there to capture [community-member] comments and turn that information into qualitative data; we tried to back this up with quantitative data. We had numbers saying this part of the population feels they aren’t being adequately served with access to healthcare. We could see both from the numbers that aspects of that were true and hear people saying in their own words that this was true. We merged those together and had something to take to the bank. That was a good approach.”

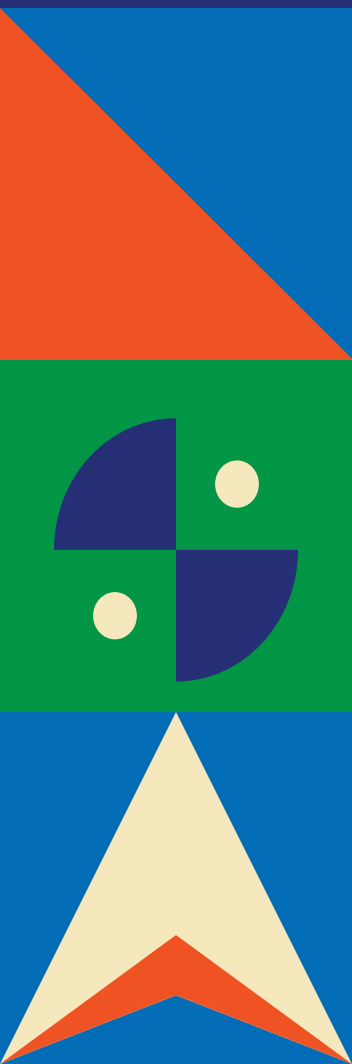
# Tragedy Inspires Action

In 2020, the murder of George Floyd in neighboring Minneapolis inspired further reflection and action on equity. The Foundation, at the request of several of its rural affiliate foundations, launched a series of “racial healing” conversations, led by Equity Coordinator Clara Lopez Ortiz and Community Development Coordinator Jason Neises. These sessions aimed to clarify the concept of equity versus equality and share examples of how policies and practices impact people based on race. The racial healing series helped inspire affiliate foundation boards to begin reviewing their policies with an equity lens, attending presentations by topic experts, and including people of color from their communities in the foundations’ work.<sup>14</sup> By 2021, the success of the racial healing conversations led to the establishment of yet another equity initiative: the Rural Equity Network, which planned to meet quarterly “to strengthen collaboration throughout the region around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion and building informed, equitable rural communities.” The Rural Equity Network was designed as a platform for rural communities to connect and share successes and challenges.<sup>15</sup>



## Using the Arts to Explore Equity Issues

Arts and culture is another area that the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque has used to disseminate messages about equity. The Foundation sponsors a film at the Julien Dubuque International Film Festival and an event following the screening that includes an equity-focused documentary. One such documentary was “Los Lecheros,” which depicted the lives of immigrant dairy farmers. Another equity-focused documentary in the festival explored high school graduation rates and how people who are Black, Indigenous, and/or of color are less likely to obtain their high school diploma and subsequently access college. “We find that arts and culture is a great way to bring people together who wouldn’t normally come to the table,” explains Nancy Van Milligen.



# Equity within the Foundation

In the midst of its growing programmatic focus on equity, the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque has shifted the responsibility of staff members and hired new staff to address equity issues. Clara Lopez Ortiz became the Foundation's Equity Officer in 2019. In addition to coordinating Inclusive Dubuque and the Business Leader Equity Cohort, Lopez Ortiz serves on community committees and boards, and attends community and grantee meetings. Community Development Officer Jason Neises has also been instrumental in the Foundation's equity work, as noted above. Mary Jo Jean-Francois joined the Foundation as Director of Grantmaking in 2021, becoming Vice President of Impact in early 2023.<sup>16</sup>

Over the past four or five years the Foundation has positioned every other staff meeting as an equity

meeting, with individual staff members choosing the topic they wanted to address, enabling others to create the agenda and curriculum. "Someone presents redlining and someone else addresses implicit bias," Nancy Van Milligen explains, "and staff shared several different videos for discussion." The equity staff meetings are part of the Foundation's internal approach to equity. Van Milligen herself benefited from the Foundation's participation in the CFLeads Equity Network (of community foundations interested in advancing equity in their work) in 2017-2018: seeing and hearing the experience of other foundations achieving success in their equity efforts and overcoming obstacles helped bolster her confidence and the board's confidence to continue their equity work.

## Diversity on the Board of Directors

Introducing and maintaining diversity on the Foundation's board of directors has been an important focus but is not always easy. "Diversifying the board was harder than drafting the vision statement," explains Nancy Van Milligen, referring to the Foundation's slogan: "A vibrant and inclusive Dubuque region with resources and opportunities for all." It has been difficult to attract and keep people of color on the board. "Over the years," Van Milligen continues, "we have been able to change the mental model of the makeup of a good board from wealthy philanthropists to a diverse group of value-aligned, community-minded, lifelong learners. It takes time; it is a process."

But participation in the CFLeads Equity Network helped produce meaningful change in the Foundation's governance: Dubuque's board chair participated in the network and experienced firsthand targeted discussions on how to embed an equity lens in an organization. According to Van Milligen, "He came home and said to the rest of the board: this is critical, equity needs to be our core value."



# Challenges in the Foundation's Equity Work

The Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque has had considerable success in integrating equity into its programming, governance, and organizational structure. But it hasn't all been smooth sailing. Prior to hiring Equity Officer Clara Lopez Ortiz, another group was responsible for Inclusive Dubuque, and "there was a push to release all decision-making and funding to that group," Nancy Van Milligen has said.

*"We really try to empower and to build power, but then where is the line that allows you to facilitate the work?"*

Another challenge, according to Van Milligen, following the murder of George Floyd, was "a group of people who felt we weren't aggressive enough, that we should have written a letter to call out White privilege." But, she explains, "our stance is to meet people where they are and bring them along on our journey."

For Lopez Ortiz, bringing diverse voices to the table is one of the major challenges of equity work, "especially if there is history behind an organization. People are not scared but are put off ... A lot of my work is focused on getting trust from our underrepresented communities by showing up and being present." But it can still be challenging to bring people into an unfamiliar environment, including even the Foundation's meeting rooms. "You get the same people every time but how do you reach the other people?" Also, she adds, "A lot of people who work in this

field struggle with the mental and emotional exhaustion of the work. We talk about how we also have to take time to reflect on the work, because not everyone will be happy."

For Anderson Sainci, disaggregating equity-related data brings pushback from both sides: "You have people who knew, people who didn't know, and people who didn't want to know. And you have people who have been living this for centuries and say yes, we have been trying to tell you and nothing has been done."

The Community Foundation has seen tangible results from its equity work, including more students of color in advanced placement courses in schools. According to Anderson Sainci, this is due at least in part to more community members and institutions striving to use data better. But there is still a need to improve equity-related services and scale them up to more institutions. Community activist and Foundation partner Art Roche believes the Foundation has had the greatest success with education goals, school success, and reading levels, among other things. Also successful have been employer alliances to create better acceptance of people's cultural differences when entering a larger workplace. But measuring impacts remains complicated: "I think in our body of work, there is more to point to," says Mary Jo Jean-Francois. "We are still trying to wrap our arms around formal measurements, especially when it comes to grantmaking."

# Looking Ahead

The Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque is looking to build on its equity achievements, especially through expanded partnerships with community stakeholders.

*“Everything has to be a partnership with policymakers, non-profits, and community members,” says Jean-Francois. “We look at ourselves as conveners and catalysts of change, and incubators ... We are hoping to raise these issues and come together with our partners to address challenges. We want to bring together the school district, non-profits, the library and look at the data to collectively make a change ... Our strength is relationships and relationship-building.”*

According to Anderson Sainci, the Foundation needs to keep equity as a priority at the board level, including by ensuring that the board is a reflection of the community. Allowing the community to be involved in the process, says Sainci, will require action, community empowerment, and shared resources: “In our organization, we say it is about creating a more equitable community of choice.” And in terms of defining success towards equity goals, seeing concrete progress requires clear, measurable actions. Creating an equitable environment will mean addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion at multiple levels.



## Endnotes

- 1 Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque Annual Report 2021
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 World Population Review
- 4 Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, "Inclusive Dubuque"
- 5 Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, "Inclusive Dubuque"
- 6 Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, Community Equity Profile
- 7 Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, "Dubuque Community Equity Profile 2023"
- 8 Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, "Advancing Equity Report: Community Equity and Outcomes 2019"
- 9 Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, "DEI Toolkit"
- 10 Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, "In Dyersville, a community effort combats summer learning loss"
- 11 Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, "Dubuque College Access Network"
- 12 Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, "Advancing Racial Equity training underway for Dubuque nonprofits"
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, "Foundation leads racial learning in rural communities"
- 15 Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, "Rural equity network launched"
- 16 Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, "Our Team"

**CFLeads**

Community Foundations  
Leading Change

[info@cfleads.org](mailto:info@cfleads.org)  
[www.cfleads.org](http://www.cfleads.org)

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