

William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust 2020 in Review



197 Grants | Over \$28.3M Awarded

Aspiring to fulfill its mission to improve lives by helping and educating people, the Trust focused its major grantmaking in 2020 on whole community health, concentrating on the crucial areas of rural health and economic prosperity in underserved and displaced communities, primarily in the states of Florida, Kentucky, New York, and North Carolina.

Grants awarded in the area of Education, both Birth-12 and higher education, also took precedence. Programs for B-12 (children from birth through grade 12) encompassed a large area of support. Higher education funding support included student scholarships, program enhancement for infrastructures and technology, and funding for teachers and professors. Finally, arts and culture; and historic preservation, rounded out the Trust's portfolio, with several grants serving a dual purpose of art positioned to educate children in underserved communities.

The year 2020 presented new challenges faced by grant partners due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Trust strived to provide a ray of light in the face of despair, awarding a number of grants on an emergency basis to support general operating costs and address the evolving needs of their communities during the crisis.

2020 GRANTS LIST

Whole Community Health

\$12,649,104 | 45%

Birth – K12

\$6,425,000 | 23%

Higher Education

\$4,875,000 | 17%

Arts and Culture

\$3,870,000 | 13%

Historic Preservation

\$525,000 | 2%

"Give light and people will find the way." —*Ella Baker*

The darkness that descended upon our country over the past year, from the tragic loss of lives and livelihoods because of the COVID-19 pandemic, to the painful and overdue reckoning of our country's legacy of racism, to the political and social divisiveness that threatened to undermine our democracy, left many to wonder, where is the light? Yet even in our darkest days, the light of compassion has always been there, even when buried behind the calamitous news that always leads.

One need look no farther than the extraordinary women profiled here to see how brightly the light of hope and empathy can shine. These women lead organizations that are doing critical work for the underserved and disenfranchised, and serve as beacons of what is possible when individuals make a steadfast commitment to service beyond self.

The past year brought into stark relief the fact that we are all connected through our shared humanity, and that to survive and thrive, our common welfare and wellbeing must come first. We are all one step away from adversity and tragedy, and cultivating a deep, authentic understanding of how our fellow human beings arrived at their current state is essential for building a more just and equitable world. The women featured here are "candles of hope" for the communities they serve, and they are also inspiring and empowering others to shine their own light.

The Kenan Trust is privileged to have these women, and the organizations they lead, as our partners. We hope you will be inspired by them and the work they nurture daily.

Other Grantees in Action



A student and his mother interact while admiring a painting by Barkley Hendricks at University of North Carolina's Ackland Art Museum.



Young musicians, with no previous training, rehearse to perform through an innovative creative youth and development program at KidzNotes.



Memorial Presbyterian Church in St. Augustine, FL, created special provisions for children and church members to meet during the pandemic.



GLOW Academy Coding Workshops are hosted by the College Bound Team, replacing what would have been in-person club experiences during COVID-19.



Children participate in a unique music therapy model that transforms the lives of people on the autism spectrum at Voices Together. Photo: Simon Griffiths.



Groundbreaking of the Veterans' Life Center, the first facility of its kind, helping at-risk 21st-century military veterans reintegrate into civilian life. Photo: ©Aesthetic Images Photography



A student engages in high-tech platforms, though the Hill Learning System, a tool for literacy development at the Hill Center. Photo: Kim Walker



The New York Common Pantry distributes hot meals outside in New York City during the pandemic. Photo: Daniel Serrette



Children engage with the range of PBS early education resources delivered to them by their local Roothouse Ambassador at PBS North Carolina.

Shining a Light on 16 Women Leaders



Diana Stanley
The Lord's Place/Halle Place
Florida

The statistics tell a grim story: Women are the fastest growing segment of the incarcerated population, increasing at nearly double the rate of men.

[READ MORE](#)



Jamaica Gilmer
The Beautiful Project
North Carolina

Before she became involved with The Beautiful Project, Avery Patterson was already a talented photographer.

[READ MORE](#)



Murielle Elizéon
Culture Mill
North Carolina

What happens when professional dancers collaborate with specialists in movement disorders, physical therapy, neuroscience, somatics and people living with Parkinson's Disease?

[READ MORE](#)



Courtney Reid-Eaton
Center for Documentary Studies
North Carolina

Through whose lens do we view the stories that shape our world view? How do we expand that point of view?

[READ MORE](#)



Alana Greer & Meena Jagganath
Community Justice Project
Florida

The Miami-based Community Justice Project (CJP) is not your typical legal organization.

[READ MORE](#)



Virginia Jacko
Miami Lighthouse
Florida

Ali Mandsaurwala was initially hesitant about sending his sight-impaired daughter Naaya to pre-kindergarten at Miami Lighthouse Academy.

[READ MORE](#)



Tina Brown
Overtown Youth Center
Florida

Dating back to 1896, Overtown was established by laborers hired to build the East Coast railroad and Miami's hotels and tourist spots.

[READ MORE](#)



Deborah Hicks-Rogoff
Partnership for Appalachian Girls' Education
North Carolina

When Deborah Hicks-Rogoff reflects on the girls who have come through the Partnership for Appalachian Girls' Education (PAGE) program since its inception in 2010, she can't help but see herself.

[READ MORE](#)



Pilar Rocha-Goldberg
El Centro Hispano
North Carolina

El Centro Hispano is a vital lifeline for the growing Hispanic/Latino population in the Triangle Area of North Carolina.

[READ MORE](#)



Kemi Ilesanmi
The Laundromat Project
New York

From its new home on Fulton Street in Brooklyn's Bed-Stuy neighborhood, The Laundromat Project (LP) is commemorating its fifteenth year with the same dexterity, creativity and collaborative spirit that has informed the non-profit's work from the start.

[READ MORE](#)



Sheena Wright
United Way of New York City
New York

As President and CEO of the United Way of NYC, and the first woman to hold the position in the organization's history, Sheena Wright wields an impressive amount of authority and influence.

[READ MORE](#)



Roszaly Akins
Black Male Working Academy
Kentucky

Roszaly Akins has been sending out an SOS for decades. But the SOS she proclaims is not a distress call but rather, a call to action: Save Our Sons.

[READ MORE](#)



Yvette Gentry
Metro United Way/Campaign for Black Male Achievement
Kentucky

Professionals working in the field of social justice and racial equity rarely have the luxury of sustained time to hone their leadership skills and share their own expertise alongside their peers.

[READ MORE](#)



Gerry Roll
Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky
Kentucky

Gerry Roll had been working tirelessly with a nonprofit organization in Perry County, Kentucky, to help members of the Appalachian community access child care, housing and health care.

[READ MORE](#)



Claire Blumenson
School Justice Project
District of Columbia

While working with young adults in the District of Columbia's juvenile and criminal justice systems, Claire Blumenson and Sarah Comeau began to notice a disturbing pattern.

[READ MORE](#)



Gina Clayton-Johnson
Essie Justice Group
California

While working with low-income tenants in Harlem, lawyer Gina Clayton-Johnson was struck by how many mothers, wives, partners and grandmothers faced eviction because a family member living with them had been charged with criminal activity.

[READ MORE](#)

Diana Stanley

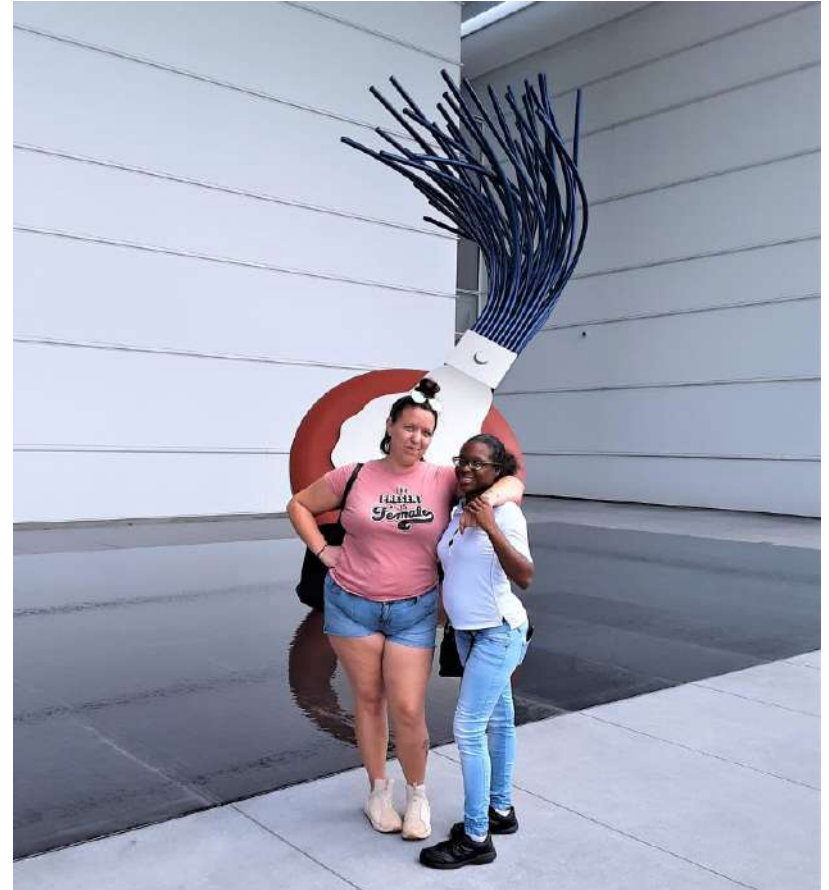
The Lord's Place/Halle Place (FL)

The statistics tell a grim story: Women are the fastest growing segment of the incarcerated population, increasing at nearly double the rate of men. In Florida alone, the number of women in jail has increased 787%, and the number of women in prison has increased 733% since 1980. Women caught up in the criminal justice system are more likely to suffer from a range of mental illness, have experienced physical and sexual abuse or trauma, and struggle with substance abuse.

As daunting as those numbers are, Diana Stanley knows that they tell only a partial story. As Chief Executive Officer of The Lord's Place, Stanley and her team witness the incalculable societal impact of women's incarceration. Not only have they been separated from children and loved ones, creating shame and guilt, they rarely have access to services that address the underlying issues that landed them there in the first place. For more than four decades, The Lord's Place has dedicated itself to ending homelessness, and its Halle Place supportive housing program is specifically focused on giving formerly incarcerated women the tools and support they need to thrive and succeed.

"There is no one-size-fits-all," says Stanley. "We work with each woman who comes through Halle Place to identify what they need and what the barriers are to getting there. We offer career exploration and on-the-job training experiences, gender-responsive programming, substance abuse prevention, health and mental health support, financial literacy, life skills around healthy relationships and healthy living, family reunification, literacy and GED support, leadership curriculum and conflict resolution."

Stanley says that Halle Place is one of The Lord's Place's most exciting, fulfilling programs—and one of the most challenging. **"We aren't just serving women, we're serving entire families that have been impacted by the incarceration. The women we work with are resilient, and they are committed to reuniting with their families, restoring trust, and rebuilding their lives."**



The women of The Lord's Place Burckle Place and Halle Place enjoyed a day of art at the Norton gallery.

Jamaica Gilmer

The Beautiful Project (NC)

Before she became involved with The Beautiful Project, Avery Patterson was already a talented photographer. But through her involvement with the Durham-based organization, Patterson not only deepened a distinctive eye for photographing her life and community, she became a black female photographer who other girls may one day name check. After all, it's not many artists whose work gets exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but Patterson can claim that distinction as one of the photographic contributors to the museum's exhibition, *Pen, Lens & Soul: The Story of The Beautiful Project*.

The Beautiful Project (TBP) was launched fifteen years ago by Jamaica Gilmer, a self-described "hope architect, curator, photographer, strategist and storyteller." She envisioned a supportive, loving community of artists, scholars and educators collaborating alongside black girls to help them discern and cultivate their identities through creative expression. In doing so, black girls would gain personal agency, fully embrace and claim their unique magnificence, and through their creative output, advance representational justice and wellness for themselves and others.

As Patterson and other BP community members toured the Met show at the start of 2020, it was clear that Gilmer's vision had come to pass. There were laughs and tears, excitement and pride. The words and images conveyed complex and nuanced portraits of dozens of black girls' lives through their own eyes, representation that is rare in America's cultural institutions.

Months later, when George Floyd and Breonna Taylor's murders sparked a racial justice wake-up call to white America, organizations including The Beautiful Project—already pivoting to sustain deeply personal, communal work during a pandemic—were expected to provide insights into what it means to be black in America. **"These visible killings and the movement for black lives brought national and international attention to realities that black people have experienced for so long,"** she says. **"While it was important to have these conversations, and be part of them, we also recognize that it is not black people's sole responsibility to help others understand the realities of what we experience every day. We had to practice existing in a place of nuance, and find that place of balance in the midst of a dangerous political climate."**



Murielle Elizéon

Culture Mill (NC)

Moving Through is a three-year project that explores the nexus of art and science—specifically, what happens when professional dancers collaborate with specialists in movement disorders, physical therapy, neuroscience, somatics and people living with Parkinson’s Disease? The emergent answer: A thoughtful, provocative perspective that illustrates the complexity of what it means to be human—physically, emotionally, cognitively and socially.

Created by Culture Mill, an arts organization based in Saxapahaw, North Carolina, the multi-partner project is seeding new perspectives in holistic approaches to improving quality of life for people living with Parkinson’s Disease. Beginning in 2019 with the ADF-commissioned collaborative performance, They Are All, which featured people living with Parkinson’s, Moving Through is guided by an interdisciplinary working group of clinicians, educators, dancers and people living with Parkinson’s Disease. A key outcome of the project will be a roadmap and a toolkit for teaching artists and multidisciplinary teams about innovative research at the intersection of artistic and scientific approaches.

Culture Mill co-director Murielle Elizéon says it was inspiring and exciting to watch three distinct communities—scientific, artistic, and people with Parkinson’s—learn from each other. **“There are many different ways of learning,”** she says. **“When you bring together scientific research, artistic expression and research, and people who are used to being defined by their condition—but are so much more—you start to have conversations that are not hierarchical. We are all talking at the same level, and creating a shared language.”**

At the same time, bringing together professionals and practitioners to create new ways of understanding is not something that could be accomplished quickly. “Relationship building moves at the speed of trust,” she says. “So when we talk about advocating for different ways to interact and learn, making sure we are doing that in ways that are honest and respectful is as important as the specific project goals and outcomes.”

Building that trust and developing a common language has been especially true of Moving Through, an initiative that relies on the real-life experiences of people who are so much more than the condition that had begun to define them and become their identity. “Instead of treating people with Parkinson’s disease as a group to be studied, we need to center their experiences and wisdom alongside our explorations of resilience, mindfulness, identity, loss, and our physical selves. It’s deeply integrative work that looks at the whole of an individual.”



Courtney Reid-Eaton

The Center for Documentary Studies at Duke

Documentary Diversity Project (DPP) (NC)

Through whose lens do we view the stories that shape our world view? How do we expand that point of view? What does access to the resources and opportunities that support a career in non-fiction storytelling look like? What do young artists from marginalized communities need to establish sustainable careers in the documentary arts? Those were some of the fundamental questions behind the Documentary Diversity Project (DPP) at The Center for Documentary Studies at Duke. The three-year pilot program was created as a way to expand the pipeline through which the vast majority of nonfiction narratives created and consumed in our country are produced, to better represent the rich diversity of its population—specifically Black and Brown voices.

Through the DPP, emerging documentary artists (young people ages 18-24) and more seasoned documentarians (post-MFA) were invited to be mentored by and collaborate with CDS faculty, visiting artists and community members to develop professional relationships, network, experiment and hone skills. Emerging artists spent 18 months in paid residencies working with CDS' resources; post-MFA fellows received 10-month residencies that included a stipend and health benefits.

William Page II was hired to coordinate the DDP for the grant period and CDS exhibitions director Courtney Reid-Eaton served as creative director. Reid-Eaton says the project was significant not only for the opportunities and outcomes it made possible for participants such as Sherrill Roland and Audria Byrd, but for the issues it raised for CDS and its contribution to the larger field of documentary work. **“Like so many other forms of storytelling, the canon of documentary work has been dominated by white men. That is not a neutral or objective lens. It’s one thing to say that we as an institution value diverse voices, but when you have—as we did with DPP—young Black people questioning what that commitment really means, it forces institutions to listen and respond in ways that they otherwise wouldn’t.”**

As a Black feminist and visual artist, Reid-Eaton says she brought both her personal experiences and professional perspectives to bear during the three years of DPP, which she describes as “amazingly profound, intense, joyful, and yes, frustrating. It was important for us to create a space for DPP participants to take chances and feel supported to do whatever they wanted to do, whether that was about Black people and the Black experience or not, and whether they chose to operate within or outside of the existing dominant cultural aesthetic which celebrates certain stories over others.”

As Duke and other institutions navigate what it means to be anti-racist, the DPP provided a tantalizing glimpse into the possibilities of expanding and democratizing the documentary arts. And it also underscores the imperative for all members of a community—including those who have dominated the conversation thus far—to be partners in expanding and valuing the stories we hear and tell to make sense of the world.



Alana Greer and Meena Jagannath

Community Justice Project (FL)

The Miami-based Community Justice Project (CJP) is not your typical legal organization. While it provides legal services to low-income communities of color on racial justice and human rights issues such as housing, employment, public benefits, immigration, and community economic development, it also incorporates training of lawyers/law students and innovative tactics like arts advocacy to lift up the stories that come out of the communities it represents. Even under the best of circumstances, the work is challenging. Yet while 2020 created additional urgency and demand for CJP's services, it also brought heightened visibility to issues of racial justice and human rights that are at the heart of its mission.

“There are certain moments that rip the roof off what’s going on in communities to reveal both the suffering of what people there live with every day and their resilience,” says co-founder and CJP director Alana Greer. **“The reckoning that has taken place this past year is only scratching the surface, but it has made more people aware of issues that disproportionately impact certain communities.”**

CJP is one of many South Florida organizations that collaborate together, and complement one another, to ensure that the communities they serve are aware of available resources and legal rights. When COVID-19 hit, CJP helped expedite a moratorium on evictions so that renters wouldn't become homeless. Other areas of ongoing focus include capacity building, immigration reform and ending mass incarceration, improving workplace conditions for low-wage immigrant women and other workers, and building community-led coalitions to counter gentrification and displacement. It also worked with artists to use music, poetry and visual arts to highlight the lived experience of its client communities.

Fellow CJP co-founder Meena Jagannath says she is cautiously optimistic that the national conversation around the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black and Brown communities, and the parallel conversation on systemic racism baked into every facet of life in the United States, are signaling a turning point. “We’ve seen how disasters can bring people together. In disaster moments, whether they be hurricanes or George Floyd’s murder, we see people reaching out to help and support each other with compassion and empathy. How do we make sure that the windows that open around these issues don’t close? What if this way of being was our everyday reality?”



Virginia Jacko

Miami Lighthouse (FL)

Ali Mandsaurwala was initially hesitant about sending his sight-impaired daughter Naaya to pre-kindergarten at Miami Lighthouse Academy. But when he learned that Naaya would be in classes with both sighted and visually-impaired children, he changed his mind. **“Parents of children with disabilities are skeptical to see how the world will receive them in a regular environment,”** he says. **“So to have her in a place like [Miami] Lighthouse is a sense of relief, and gave me hope that everything’s going to be okay.”**

The Mandsaurwala family’s experiences illustrate the powerful impact of the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, a nationally recognized and trusted leader in education, training, research and vision enhancement to foster independence for people of all ages. The Miami Lighthouse Academy is a first-of-its-kind fully inclusive educational model that combines equal numbers of visually impaired and sighted students. Launched in 2018 as a pre-kindergarten pilot, the model proved so effective that it is now expanding through second grade.

For Miami Lighthouse President and CEO Virginia Jacko, the mission is personal. She lost her sight later in life, and Miami Lighthouse helped her adjust and adapt to her changing circumstances. Since taking the leadership reins in 2005, Jacko has increased program participation fiftyfold and expanded its physical space nearly five times over. For the past 13 years, Miami Lighthouse has had a four-star rating on Charity Navigator, ranking among the top 1% of nonprofits nationwide based on its strong financial base and broad transparency.

Jacko says that the generous support from the Kenan Charitable Trust has had a remarkable multiplier effect. “I was able to go to other donors and say, ‘here’s what Kenan has done, will you match that?’ And they have! Kenan recognized that Miami Lighthouse is a jewel, and helped us to become a well-polished diamond.”



Tina Brown

Overtown Youth Center (FL)

Dating back to 1896, Overtown was established by laborers hired to build the East Coast railroad and Miami's hotels and tourist spots. Miami's oldest Black community, Overtown became a thriving, culturally rich neighborhood until the so-called urban "renewal" programs of the mid-20th century marked the start of declining opportunities and rising poverty for its residents. But today, the pride of Overtown has returned to an area once dubbed the Harlem of the South.

Tina Brown grew up in Overtown, and now serves as chief executive officer of Overtown Youth Center (OYC). Founded in 2003 by NBA Hall-of-Famer Alonzo Mourning and real estate developer Martin Z. Margulies, OYC provides comprehensive services to help at-risk youth become healthy lifelong learners, and position them for success. "While fate landed me in position within the community I grew up in," she says, "it is my lived experienced that drives my urgent desire to ensure that every kid that is touched by our program has the resources, confidence and support to reach their full potential."

OYC's services range from in-school, after-school and summer programs to college prep and career training, and from health, wellness and resiliency programs to tracks in financial literacy, culinary arts and environmental awareness. For example, through its Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics (STEM/STEAM) classes, OYC students gain confidence in life skills such as problem-solving, creativity and collaboration by exploring topics such as Earth Science, Virtual Reality and Architectural Design.

Since its inception, OYC has graduated 100% of its high-school seniors, and most have gone on to pursue college degrees. Best of all, OYC can offer all of its programming free of charge to participants and their families, thanks to support from federal, state and local grants, individual and corporate donations, and philanthropy from foundations. **"OYC stands firm in our commitment to strengthening communities, one child and family at a time, by dismantling systemic barriers that plague our communities,"** says Brown. **"We affirm that Black and Brown youth and families deserve a home that is beyond the basics for survival."**



Deborah Hicks-Rogoff

Partnership for Appalachian Girls' Education (PAGE) (NC)

When Deborah Hicks-Rogoff reflects on the girls who have come through the Partnership for Appalachian Girls' Education (PAGE) program since its inception in 2010, she can't help but see herself. Hicks-Rogoff grew up in Appalachia appreciating the resilience of its people, the strength of its communities, and the vital importance of education in this rural part of the Southeast. As she pursued each new educational opportunity, culminating in a doctorate in education and human development from Harvard University, Hicks-Rogoff knew she wanted to bring her experiences to bear to help the next generation of girls from Appalachia.

PAGE is doing just that. Working with approximately 75 girls from the sixth grade through high school graduation, PAGE and its community and school partners provide year-round learning and mentoring opportunities, with an emphasis on critical thinking, the STEM fields, interdisciplinary and place-based learning, digital literacy, and building confidence and leadership skills.

"The joy of PAGE is seeing the incredible changes in the girls we serve, watching them gain a strong voice and sense of identity, and a vision of what is possible for them," says Hicks-Rogoff. One of the challenges facing young people in Appalachia is what the future might hold for them, especially given the disappearance of economies such as logging, tobacco farming, and coal mining. PAGE is positioning girls and young women to embrace the future as something that they can help create in this vulnerable region.

"There are a lot of misconceptions about Appalachia, and for people living there it can sometimes feel as though they are overlooked," she says. "But like much of the world, Appalachia is changing. In order to create new ladders of opportunity, Appalachia needs to connect to global communities and have passionate, educated young people reimagining what the region could be. PAGE participants' vision may be different from what their parents or grandparents had envisioned when they were young, and that's part of what makes it exciting. These girls are developing their voices as leaders who can have a say in their own futures, as well as the future of Appalachia."



Pilar Rocha-Goldberg

El Centro Hispano (NC)

El Centro Hispano is a vital lifeline for the growing Hispanic/Latino population in the Triangle Area of North Carolina. With program focus areas in education, economic development, health and well-being, and community engagement and advocacy, the organization provides much-needed support to the region's residents, while also engaged in leadership development and building coalitions of power.

In the weeks before N.C. Governor Roy Cooper issued COVID-19 stay-at-home orders in the spring of 2020, El Centro Hispano had already recognized the implications of the impending pandemic for the historically marginalized population it serves. **“We’re very proud that El Centro under the direction of [President and CEO] Pilar Rocha-Goldberg, who has led the organization for over a decade, really stepped up to plate for what our community needed,”** says Eliazar Posada, acting president and CEO while Rocha-Goldberg is on sabbatical. **“Through her vision of how we must respond as El Centro Hispano, we created the Covid-19 Emergency Response Fund that provided direct assistance with things like housing, food and clothing, and we hired community health workers and lobbied for increased access to free testing and vaccinations.”**

At the same time, the pandemic redoubled the organization’s commitment to the host of ongoing issues affecting undocumented and immigrant communities. El Centro Hispano interacts with lawmakers, elected officials, medical service providers, government agencies and community leaders to advocate for the tens of thousands of people who provide essential and frontline services. “How does not having health insurance impact a worker who can’t afford to be sick?” says Posada. “Without adequate technology in the home, how can a child keep up with online learning? How do we drive voter registration so that people can be part of decisions that affect their lives? Decision makers are really starting to understand the urgency of issues that we had been working on well before COVID.”



Kemi Ilesanmi

The Laundromat Project (NY)

From its new home on Fulton Street in Brooklyn's Bed-Stuy neighborhood, The Laundromat Project (LP) is commemorating its fifteenth year with the same dexterity, creativity and collaborative spirit that has informed the non-profit's work from the start. Even though the move to Bed-Stuy was planned before 2020, the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice underscored the vital importance of the organization to the artists and communities it serves.

Combining the arts and creative expression with community empowerment, The LP has directly invested over \$1M in 180+ multiracial, multigenerational, and multidisciplinary artists; 80 innovative public art projects; and engaged more than 44,000 New Yorkers across the city since its inception. And it belongs to a vibrant network of local, regional and international community-based organizations that support and learn from one another.

“In April of 2020, we established a Creative Action Fund to provide direct grants to artists in our Create Change network,” says Kemi Ilesanmi, The LP's executive director. **“These artists are our neighbors, and many of them lost jobs. This is a way to support them so that they can continue to work in communities across the five boroughs while also being able to pay rent. We also help artists with information about mutual aid and government programs that they might be eligible for.”**

Ilesanmi says that The LP's move to Bed-Stuy meant that it was near the heart of the Black Lives Matter movement in Brooklyn, where the giant BLM street mural painted in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder became a central gathering place during the summer months. Throughout the summer, when the two-block stretch was closed to traffic, residents and visitors used the space to express not only anger and calls for change, but also joy, solidarity and a celebration of Bed-Stuy's legacy as a resilient, historically Black community.

“People of color have been part of the fabric of America from day one, but historically we haven't been recognized and respected,” says Ilesanmi. “The LP is part of a larger movement to strengthen these communities, and even though we had to rethink how we did some of our work, we continue to gain momentum.”



Sheena Wright

United Way of New York City (NY)

As President and CEO of the United Way of NYC, and the first woman to hold the position in the organization's history, Sheena Wright wields an impressive amount of authority and influence. But that's not how she approaches her work.

"We are who New York City needs us to be," she says. "Communities know what they need to solve their own problems. Our work is to empower and equip those communities to implement the changes that will work for them. We have trusted relationships at the community, government, nonprofit and corporate level, and that allows us to work effectively on the ground in ways that are credible and culturally responsible, while also focusing on systems change around equity and inclusion."

Wright's very first day on the job in 2012 coincided with Hurricane Sandy making landfall, an experience that proved useful for the rapid deployment of resources that were needed once again when COVID-19 began devastating the lives of low-income New Yorkers. As nimble and necessary as UWNYC is in times of crisis, its larger mission is to mobilize communities to break the cycles of poverty and build paths of self-sufficiency.

Using an integrated suite of programs that build on and complement one another, the UWNYC uses a two-generational approach to foster upward mobility and empower individuals and families to be champions of change to create vibrant, healthy neighborhoods.

For example, research shows that reading proficiently by third grade is the single biggest predictor of whether or not a child graduates from high school. In New York City 6 out of 10 children are not reading at grade-level, making it more likely that they will drop out before graduating. Without a high school diploma, residents have fewer job options, which contributes to higher rates of poverty, poor health, incarceration, substance abuse, and dependence on public services. Through its ReadNYC initiative, children, parents, educators and other stakeholders identified and implemented six key strategies to optimize success, including a focus on health and wellness.

"We look at everything we do through the lens of social justice," says Wright. "We didn't arrive at where we are today by accident, and we won't be able to address the root causes of inequality and poverty unless we know that history. We want to help people who have been marginalized claim their power and accelerate and sustain their economic mobility."



Roszalyn Akins

Black Male Working (BMW) Academy (KY)

Roszalyn Akins has been sending out an SOS for decades. But the SOS she proclaims is not a distress call but rather, a call to action: Save Our Sons.

A longtime educator and trusted member of the Lexington, Kentucky, community, Akins was disturbed by how Black males at Leestown Middle School—where she had taught and served as Dean of Students—lagged far behind their peers. Her church, First Baptist Church Bracktown, was connected to Leestown through an “Adopt A School” program, so Akins decided to build on that relationship to focus on student achievement and academic success. Christened the Black Male Working (BMW) Academy, the initiative set out to educate, motivate and activate the potential for excellence for those middle school boys.



Fast forward sixteen years. What started with 40 boys in grades 6-8 has blossomed into a highly successful, highly sought-after, multi-site K-12 program dedicated to positioning young Black males for college and career success. More than 435 Lexington youth have been forever shaped through their involvement with BMW Academy, including those in the earliest cohort who have gone on to graduate from college and come back to help those who follow in their footsteps.

It's a rigorous program that students and their families must apply to, and that requires commitment from the students and their families. Academy students must attend weekly Saturday sessions, limit television and video games, read a minimum of 60 minutes a night, participate in community service programs, maintain a minimum grade point average to participate in educational and college trips, and maintain good conduct at home, school and in the community. They hear from successful Black men in the community and gain real-life skills ranging from money management and dressing for success to manners and being well-spoken. There's also **Beautillion**, a semi-annual BMW Black Tie Event where juniors and seniors are presented to society by their mothers.

“We are in a war right now in this country for the future of Black men,” say Akins. **“To quote Frederick Douglass, it's easier to build strong children than to repair broken men. Through BMW Academy, boys and young men see that there is a place for them in this world, and that there are people who want to help them succeed.”**

Yvette Gentry

Metro United Way/Campaign for Black Male Achievement (KY)

Professionals working in the field of social justice and racial equity rarely have the luxury of sustained time to hone their leadership skills and share their own expertise alongside their peers. But that's exactly what the Black Male Achievement Leaders in Residence Fellowship offered to mid-to-senior-level career men and women working to improve outcomes for Black men and boys in their cities and communities.

Hailing from New York, D.C., Baltimore, New Orleans, Durham, Louisville, Milwaukee and Albany, participants had the space to deepen their understanding of organizational development, succession planning, resource development, strategic communications and public policy. The Kenan-funded initiative was a partnership between the University of Louisville, Metro United Way, and the Campaign for Black Male Achievement.

Yvette Gentry, director of justice and opportunity for Metro United Way, says that the heavy lifting required to address and dismantle institutionalized racism calls for multisector partnerships and solutions. **“The nature of this work can lead to tunnel vision if you only focus on one aspect of the larger picture,”** she says. **“That’s why it was so great to bring together a brain trust of people to talk about these issues in a broader way, and figure out what has worked in other places.”** She notes that the cross-pollination of people from local nonprofits, national foundations, membership networks and national organizations produces a more fertile environment for both short-term and long-range goals.

A Louisville native and mother of four sons, Gentry stepped into the national spotlight in 2020 when she took a leave from MetroUnited Way to serve as Louisville Metro Police Department interim director in the wake of Breonna Taylor’s killing by police. With the murder of George Floyd and the movement for Black lives that roiled the nation, demands for racial justice raised the visibility and urgency of the work that Gentry and so many others have been engaged in their whole lives. **“We’ve been able to invite more people to the table to learn about these issues, and to envision a path forward. There is a sense of optimism that we are headed in a direction where there is greater communication about the problems that exist, and a greater commitment to solving them collectively.”**



Gerry Roll

Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky (KY)

Gerry Roll had been working tirelessly with a nonprofit organization in Perry County, Kentucky, to help members of the Appalachian community access child care, housing and health care. But the time came where she felt that no matter how hard she and her colleagues worked, they weren't able to get ahead of immediate needs to focus on longer-term strategies. "It felt like we were on a hamster wheel," she says. "We couldn't shore up the dam because we were so busy pulling people from the river."

Today, Roll is the executive director for the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky, a community foundation founded in 2009 to improve lives and strengthen communities throughout southeastern Kentucky. With more than \$15 million in assets under management, the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky targets its grant making and program activity on community economic development, education, community health, and other complex issues that require a long-term view.

"What community foundations do is to change the way capital flows into communities so that they have access to use it in ways that works for them," she says. **"It's about supporting communities in ways that are the most meaningful and long-lasting."** In the past year, the Foundation met the pressing needs of families impacted by COVID-19, a challenge made all the more difficult owing to agencies already stretched thin.

For example, Kristin Collins, the Foundation's associate executive director, notes that much of Kentucky was already a childcare "desert," with too few child care centers to meet demand. When COVID-19 shut down businesses, the few options for parents who had to keep working became even scarcer. "Thanks to Kenan and other funders, we were able to help some of these centers stay afloat," she says, "but our larger work is how to create a sustainable child care business model in our communities, including home-based care. Child care is not babysitting; it's a business where women can be entrepreneurs if we can provide the tools and resources they need. We're working holistically with communities and other organizations invested in coming up with effective, sustainable solutions."



Claire Blumenson

School Justice Project (DC)

While working with young adults in the District of Columbia's juvenile and criminal justice systems, Claire Blumenson and Sarah Comeau began to notice a disturbing pattern. Both women had received post-graduate legal fellowships to help clients access their rights, work that required a sophisticated understanding of overlapping—and often disparate—rules and requirements across a variety of legal and educational agencies.

“Client after client told us that they had done everything they thought they needed to do to finish certain credits, only to be told that those credits didn’t count or transfer across systems;” says Blumenson. **“At first we thought it was a fluke, but we heard the same stories over and over again.”** Through seed funding from Echoing

Green’s Black Male Achievement Fellowship, they joined forces to launch School Justice Project (SJP) in 2013 with a mission of ensuring that older, court-involved students with disabilities had access to a quality education. SJP uses a three-pronged strategy: provide direct representation and advocacy for individual clients, address systemic issues related to interagency irregularities and inconsistencies, and provide community outreach and legal training on how to integrate special education law into the juvenile and criminal court contexts. SJP’s special education attorneys work to both increase educational equity and decrease mass incarceration.

Blumenson says she is humbled by the fortitude of SJP’s clients, teenagers and young adults who, despite the acute and significant barriers that exist for students in the juvenile and criminal justice system, are determined to earn their high school diplomas or GEDs. For example, students who thought they had completed the required courses toward their diplomas while placed in secure facilities discovered that those credits either didn’t count after all, or counted as partial credits—which DC Public Schools and charter schools don’t accept. “When you have one government agency contradicting another agency, it can feel like a set-up,” says Blumenson. “SJP is able to be effective in part because we can learn from our clients and cite direct client feedback and experiences to advocate for systemic policy changes. Education should be a basic human right, but our country’s education and justice systems were built on inequality.”

The Kenan Charitable Trust provided a grant to SJP to explore how its track record in providing special education legal services could scale. “We knew theoretically that what we were learning in DC could be applied nationally, so it was a really powerful experience to explore how the SJP model could work in other jurisdictions,” says Blumenson. “We are so grateful to have had this opportunity to share our work with others engaged in similar efforts across the country. This is just the beginning.”



Gina Clayton-Johnson

Essie Justice Group (CA)

While working with low-income tenants in Harlem, lawyer Gina Clayton-Johnson was struck by how many mothers, wives, partners and grandmothers faced eviction because a family member living with them had been charged with criminal activity.

“One in four women in this country has a loved one who is incarcerated, and many of them are sole heads of households,” she says. “These women experience devastating mental health implications that accompany the isolation, marginalization, shame and guilt they experience.” Seeking resources that addressed the particular emotional, social and economic issues facing these women, she was stunned to learn that none existed.

Inspired by her great-grandmother Essie Bailey, the daughter of a Louisiana sharecropper who raised three children while working three jobs, Clayton-Johnson founded **Essie Justice Group**, the first national support and advocacy group for and of women, gender non-conforming people, and trans women with incarcerated loved ones. Since then, Essie has joined with dozens of other organizations that provide resources and support for individuals and communities impacted by mass incarceration, while advocating for the dismantling of the systems that perpetuate (and benefit from) the racial injustice baked into this country’s political and legal power structures.

Essie works in three areas: **Ending the crippling money bail system** through corporate divestment, legislation, and actions; **advancing gender justice**; and by supporting and empowering women affected by mass incarceration through its nine-week **Healing to Advocacy** initiative. The Healing to Advocacy program begins with nurturing individual self-love, and provides the tools, resources and sisterhood for those women to become advocates for themselves, their families and their communities. Program graduates return to share their own strength and experiences with subsequent cohorts, creating a powerful matrilineal network that is gaining momentum and visibility.

“Women tell us that were it not for Essie, the depths of sadness and isolation would have been too much,” says Clayton-Johnson. **“And now our graduates are leading advocacy efforts in their communities. That’s an affirming and catalytic testament to the power of sisterhood to create positive and lasting change.”**

