



pathways to *SUCCESS*

"You know the saying..." says Karen Osbrey, Board President of Interfaith Human Services of Putnam (IHSP). "If you educate a man, you educate a man; but if you educate a woman, you educate a community."

Osbrey knows that empowering women is essential to supporting a community. "Women are the nurturers. They pass values down to the next generation. But she usually puts her dreams aside to make life better for the whole family because she is the caregiver." Located in economically challenged northeastern Connecticut, IHSP is an all-volunteer nonprofit that funds everything from a food pantry and used clothing closet to fuel and rent assistance. When Osbrey saw a need to support families with education to improve their finances and overall welfare, she reached out to the Northeast Connecticut Women & Girls Fund for seed money.

A native of the same area in Connecticut, Osbrey has probably worked with every non-profit and community service organization in the region over her years as tireless volunteer, advocate and leader. In 2018, she and an IHSP colleague were discussing their wish lists. One item was to remove the financial obstacles for motivated people to improve their lives through education. Realizing it was not just about paying tuition but all the other necessities (books, supplies, childcare, even gas money), they dreamed up the Pathways 2 Success program. In partnership with Quinebaug Valley Community College (QVCC), the program's goal is "to help women better their economic situation by providing short term education and training opportunities that can lead to immediate, improved employment."

Around the same time, Osbrey was invited to join the steering committee of the new Northeast Connecticut Women & Girls Fund. Already serving on three boards, she had "a full plate" but realized the fund could help launch her new program. They applied for and received a grant. "We helped just three or four women the first year," says Osbrey. "We continued and got better at it. The board decided that even if we help just one woman finish a certificate program and she gets a job that earns \$5 more an hour, then it's worth it."

Brandy Perez completed her certified nursing assistant (CNA) certificate this past year with the help of the Pathways 2 Success program. The Killingly native and single mother of four now works at Westview Nursing

Home. Perez was a personal care assistant (PCA) for 10 years, working one-on-one in people's homes. She wanted to be a CNA, a position considered a medical worker rather than a caregiver. It offers more responsibility and a higher wage. Perez applied for a certificate program through QVCC. "They called me to say we have one spot left but it had to be paid for up front. So if I couldn't come up with the money I'd lose the spot."

Osbrey has served on QVCC's Foundation since 1991; it helps students with financial assistance and proudly declares it has provided debt-free education for the past nine years. Osbrey knew Brandy had great potential and the Foundation could pay her tuition. However, these scholarships cannot fund other expenses. "I couldn't take money away from my kids for my education," said Brandy, "I had to pay my bills." Osbrey suggested that Brandy take advantage of Pathways 2 Success.

"They paid for my schooling and gave me a voucher to get books, scrubs, a medical watch--everything I needed was covered," said Brandy. "I'll be honest, I cried. I was working two jobs and knew I needed to go back to school to make more money so I could work one job and be home more with my kids. I was willing to do whatever it took to get it done. When they told me I didn't even have to pay for my license at the end of the class, I was so excited!"

Although Brandy is now juggling the care of several people (rather than one at a time) and facing the challenges of the pandemic in a nursing home, she enjoys her new job. "I love my residents; it's just nice to be there. Everyone keeps saying once it's over, everything will run smoothly again. I'm now certified and get to work in a medical field and not in someone's home. I feel like I have a purpose."

"Brandy is an amazing addition to our outstanding team of health care professionals," says David T.



Empowering women & girls in eastern Connecticut

TOP LEFT: Girl Scouts of CT's 2020 Campership Program. *Photo courtesy of Northeast W&G Fund*

BOTTOM RIGHT: Brandy Perez. *Photo by David Panteleakos*





Panteleakos, Administrator of Westview Health Care Center. “Her work ethic, dedication and commitment to our sick and frail elderly population is remarkable, especially in these times.”

Brandy’s next goal is to buy her own home, which she knows will be a huge accomplishment. “I just want more for my children,” she says. “I think we just get stuck and don’t know how to get out of it. We’ve struggled for so long, we think it’s just our life. Then someone comes along and says, no, you can do more. It helps push us forward. I can’t thank Karen enough for her support.”

“Life is not always a straight path, it’s stepping stones,” says Osbrey. “Sometimes all it takes is a spark. Like, wow, somebody thinks I can do that? Your stepping stone might be becoming a CNA, which translates to \$5 above minimum wage. That’s a big game changer for your household. You can spend that money any way you want, but maybe you put it toward the next step, to become a phlebotomist or an RN. Sometimes you have to zig and zag but keep your eye on the ultimate goal and that’s all that matters in the end.”

There are four regional Women & Girls Funds, all supported by endowments from the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut. This “hub for meaningful philanthropy” supports non-profits in 42 communities in New London, Windham and Tolland counties by helping donors “establish personally meaningful charitable funds that make a lasting impact on the issues and communities of greatest interest to them.” The Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut has awarded more than \$68 million in grants and scholarships on behalf of area donors since being founded in 1983.

The first Women & Girls Fund was established in southeast CT in 1999 in response to donor requests and community need. The funds support nonprofits that help women and girls “pursue positive, productive lives – for themselves and their families.” In 2018, The Community Foundation published a report on The Status of Women and Girls in Eastern Connecticut. This document presents some striking statistics: 90% of single-parent households are headed by a mother; 25% of all children in eastern Connecticut live with a single mother; in 7 eastern Connecticut towns, more than 40% of households are in poverty or ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed – “Coined by the United Way, ALICE describes working households that are above the federal poverty line, but are unable to cover basic living expenses.”)

According to Community Foundation Vice President & Chief Development Officer Alison Woods, “The four Women & Girls Funds work on the ‘think global





TOP LEFT: Nutmeg Big Brothers Big Sisters provides community-based mentoring for Windham area girls. *Photo courtesy of Windham W&G Fund*

BOTTOM LEFT: STEPS is an empowerment program for middle and high school girls. *Photo courtesy of Southeast W&G Fund*

ABOVE: Laura and Scott Moorehead at the Sassy Chapeau Fundraiser. Laura & Scott created a named fund for Northeast Women & Girls Fund in 2020. *Photo courtesy of Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut*

BELOW: February 2018 report launch of *The Status of Women and Girls in Eastern Connecticut*. L to R: Valerie Grimm, past trustee of the Community Foundation; Frances Padilla, President of Universal Health Care Foundation of CT; Susan Yolen, VP for Public Policy & Advocacy at Planned Parenthood of Southern New England; Beatrice Jennette, President of STEPS Inc.; Maryam Elahi, President and CEO of the Community Foundation of Eastern CT. *Photo courtesy of Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut*



act local concept.' Each focuses on pockets of 10-11 towns to lift up girls and women in those areas. Woods says it's not just about money. "It's about leadership, advocacy, influence, education and partnership. The funds are a way for women to come together as a giving collective, to harness the power of women as givers and doers, to imagine how things can be better."

"People have great intentions to give, to volunteer, but we use our own lens of how to carry it out," says Woods. "The local non-profits have the connections to the community. Listening makes the process more effective and authentic. At the heart of the Women & Girls Funds is the notion of bringing people together, bringing voices of the people we serve into the equation, taking time to listen, learn and respect."

Donors can make a gift of any size to any of the Women & Girls Funds. "We've had people give \$5 or \$50K," says Woods. They can take a leadership role by creating a named fund with a \$10K minimum donation. Woodstock resident Laura Moorehead is one of the founders of the Northeast CT Women & Girls Fund. After serving on the steering committee for a few years, she volunteered to be a co-chair. Last year, she and her husband Scott created a named fund. "We are both very blessed in our lives and firmly believe in helping as much as we can. We have free time, we like to volunteer and we have enough money to give when we can. We thought this would be a good way to help...now and after we're gone."

Named fun donors can choose projects to support or leave it up to the organization to decide what to back. For 2021, the Moorehead's fund will support a grant to CT Legal Services for their domestic violence advocacy project. This assists victims in divorcing their abusers, retaining custody of children, securing financial assistance and more. Other Northeast Women & Girls Fund grants have supported mentoring programs, Girl Scout camperships, and gender equity programs. "What I like about our Northeast Fund is that we offer special programs in addition to funding grants," says Laura. These have included a self-defense course, cooking classes, and health programs. "We have so many gifted women on our steering committee, we like to not only put our money where our mouth is but share our talents too."

After more than 35 years in fundraising, Alison Woods is still incredibly passionate about philanthropy. "My biggest lesson regarding donating: it is so much more than the money. It's the spirit, enthusiasm, and inspiration that's the secret ingredient. People are instinctually big-hearted. How can we in non-profits and fundraising facilitate a structure for people to act on their generous natures? How can we unleash it?" 📺

To learn more about the Community Foundation of Eastern CT and the Women & Girls Funds, visit www.cfct.org.