



The *right* thing to do

THE PITTSBURGH FOUNDATION LAUNCHES "100 PERCENT PITTSBURGH"
TO BUILD A REGION THAT INCLUDES EVERYONE

IT HAD STORMED THE NIGHT BEFORE, hard enough to postpone the Pirates game and scrub the air, leaving it sharp and glittering for the early morning joggers along the North Shore Trail. The bridges overhead buzzed with the aggregate sound of thousands of people going to work. Halfway between PNC Park and Heinz Field, two people slept curled on the concrete. One had a lime green blanket pulled all the way over his head, and had set his sneakers neatly to his left, heel-to-heel and toe-to-toe. The other slept below a T-shirt tied like bunting to the railing: "Steelers Six-time Super Bowl Champions."

Similar tent camps pitched under bridges and along the city's trails don't fit the image of Pittsburgh that has delighted the nation's list makers, popping up in articles such as "Most Livable City," "Most Underrated American Cities," and "A Best Opportunity City." In these narratives, unemployment, hunger and disadvantage are words of the past, of the catastrophic loss of steel and its related industries in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

To say Pittsburgh hit the rock bottom of the American economy is putting it lightly: Between 1980 and 1983, the region hemorrhaged more than 95,000 manufacturing jobs—as well the population, tax money, and services that went with them. Its identity was shaken to the core.

Since then, countless organizations and people have forged Pittsburgh's transition from an economy of heavy manufacturing to one of finance, service, tech, health, education and energy. An influx of capital signals the region's remarkable economic recovery: Billions of dollars have flowed into the region's universities, technology sector and Downtown. This year, some 8,000 housing units are proposed for construction throughout the city.

But the benefits of this revitalization are not equitably enjoyed. In 2014, 12.4 percent of the Pittsburgh Metropolitan Statistical Area population lived in poverty, as did 17.5 percent of the region's children under 18. Research from The Pittsburgh Foundation indicates that, for at least 30 percent of residents—those living in poverty and on its edge—the opportunities afforded by the new Pittsburgh are out of reach.

"That's just not acceptable," said Maxwell King, president of The Pittsburgh Foundation. "There's a moral imperative to say we don't want to end up with two societies, two worlds, two cities; haves and have-nots. It's just wrong."

For the next 10 to 12 years, the foundation will re-organize its grantmaking around a new operating principle, 100 Percent Pittsburgh. Sixty percent of unrestricted funds—money not dedicated to a specific organization or field of interest—will help the region's most vulnerable residents overcome barriers to opportunity.

"We're not going to make it perfect," King said. "But we have to turn it around and stop going backwards."

By listening to those confronting the everyday challenges of poverty, working with direct service providers, and convening other organizations, The Pittsburgh Foundation aims to change systems of inequity, hacking at the roots of regional disparity. It will take time to determine the full scope of 100 Percent

Pittsburgh, but the foundation has already dedicated 51 percent of unrestricted funds for 2016 to the initiative.

"None of us should be satisfied with a city or a country in which an individual who is working full time or overtime and working hard to raise a family lives at or near poverty," said King. "That's kind of basic. It's very American, isn't it?"

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—Maxwell King

By 9 a.m. on the Saturday before Easter there was already a line wrapped around Pittsburgh's South Side Market House. The crowd was there for one of 17 monthly free produce distributions from the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank's Produce to People program. More than 15 percent of residents in the 11-county region come to the food bank or its network for help each year, and nearly 40 percent of clients are working.

A handout listing the distributions' dates and locations reads, "Everyday people need food every day." That Saturday morning, Tom Melton, special distributions coordinator for the Food Bank, expected 1,200 people to pick up food.

Inside, two lines of tables stretched the length of the Market House. Volunteers split 18,000 pounds of food equally between them: piles of cabbage dwarfed the 10-year-old boys stacking them; a University of Pittsburgh student group separated collard greens and apples into individual bags and grouped them next to piles of yogurt and bread. They made way for a forklift depositing a pallet of onions.

Cynthia Johnson usually doesn't take the onions, but she picked up yogurt and other snacks for her four grandchildren who spend time with her while their parents are at work. Without Produce to People, Johnson said, food would cost her too much. She works full time as a secretary at the University of Pittsburgh, but it doesn't cover her costs.

Darlene Schrello agreed. Standing in line with her family, she said she works full time in hospital administration. "The cost of living keeps going up and wages aren't. Eating healthy is expensive."

Justin Lee, the Food Bank's chief operating officer, said more than half of clients come fewer than three times a year. Need "isn't limited to a specific segment of Pittsburgh: it's the suburbs, it's the urban areas, it's our surrounding counties. It's in all places."

In the past, people could scrape by because the Pittsburgh market just happened to provide low-cost housing. Population loss and suburban flight meant low demand and plenty of stock, said Larry Swanson, executive director of ACTION Housing, a nonprofit developer of affordable housing. But over the last decade, the city housing market has changed dramatically, losing nearly 40 percent of housing that rents for less than \$1,000 a month. A recent study from the Pennsylvania Housing Alliance (PHA) found that Allegheny County now falls 30,000 units short of the affordable housing it needs.

The lack of housing "is creating a lot of pressure on people of modest means," Swanson said, citing East Liberty. From 2010 to 2014, the rental vacancy rate in the city of Pittsburgh was nearly halved, dropping from 8.8 percent to 4.8 percent, according to the PHA study. Similarly, the homeowner vacancy rate dropped from 3.4 to 1.9 percent.

"People who have lived in those communities for a long time can no longer afford to. They have to move, and so they feel even more disadvantaged."

The disparities are racial as well as economic. In a 2012 study by Pittsburgh Today and Pitt's University Center for Social and Urban Research, 18 percent of African Americans in western Pennsylvania said "they often or almost always have trouble paying for housing and other basic necessities." In the city of Pittsburgh, that number was much higher: 26.4 percent of African Americans reported they "almost always had trouble paying for basic necessities," compared with 1.6 percent of other races, according to The Pittsburgh Regional Quality of Life Survey.

"We need new strategies that get us to a higher volume of affordable housing units," Swanson said. "The cost of new development and the cost of preservation of existing units is dramatically different. The truth is we can do a lot more with the existing housing avail-

able in our market."

The everyday costs of living—food, housing, transit—weigh most heavily on young adults, female-headed households, minorities and people with disabilities, according to 2012 research from the Urban Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank. The study, supported in part by The Forbes Funds, explored poverty in the region and called attention to the near-poor, people not technically living below the federal poverty levels but struggling to make ends meet. They constitute a vulnerable swath of the population, which is often left out of policy discussions and doesn't qualify for assistance. And they're reaching out for help, said Bob Nelkin, CEO of the United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania.

"We see a lot of people coming for services for the very first time," he said, particularly through the United Way's 2-1-1 helpline, which connects people with resources through text, chat, and calls. In 2013, its first year, the helpline fielded 22,000 calls; it's now up to 81,000.

"[Those calls] are about basic needs," Nelkin said. "Twenty-five percent of the calls are 'How do I avoid being homeless?' Twenty-



five percent of the calls are ‘How do I keep the utilities on?’ And 25 percent are a grouping of food, clothing, transportation.”

Nelkin attributes the growing need to a collusion of factors, ticking them off on his fingers. The recession forced people to exhaust their reserves; people are living longer and are more frail and less able to produce income; and there are fewer jobs that pay well. According to a report from PennCAN, a Philadelphia-based research and advocacy group, U.S. jobs requiring a college degree have grown by 2.2 million from 2007 to 2015, while jobs requiring a high school degree dropped by 5.8 million.

“People find ways to get along,” Nelkin said. “And then, through no fault of their own, something happens and it just finishes them off. As a result, they need some help. They don’t want help forever; they want to get back on their feet.

“The gap between need and resources is going to grow every year. There are fewer government dollars, charitable dollars are down, and human service organizations have more people in need. The things that we pay for today, maybe we can’t pay for in the future. If we want to be humane as a society and as a community, we’re going to have to meet those needs in a different way.”

“[Need] isn’t limited to a specific segment of Pittsburgh: it’s the suburbs, it’s the urban areas, it’s our surrounding counties. It’s in all places.”

*— Justin Lee, chief operating officer,
Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank*

One way to do that, Nelkin said, is to support people in communities who support one another.

Carla Robinson didn’t hear the first knock. She was working by herself in the conference room of the Homewood Brushton Family Support Center. At the second, more

insistent knock, she rushed to unlock the door for a woman whose car was parked on Tioga Street, the tank on empty.

“Can I borrow \$10, Carla? I can bring it to you at the Thursday meeting.”

Robinson waved her back to the conference room. “I know I have \$10 somewhere,” she said, turning out her purse. “When I got home from work this morning, I stopped at the store and I think I just folded up the money with the receipt...” she said to herself, still rifling. Then, “Here it is!” she said, handing it up.

The woman hugged her and said, “I told my daughter, ‘We have to stop here. These are my people.’ Are you here tomorrow? No? OK, well, I’ll see you Thursday and I’ll have it then, thank you so much!”

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The \$10 gas loan isn't a typical service of the Allegheny County Family Support Centers, but it's indicative of the kind of community they enable. Robinson said the center meets people where they are.

"Every child is different. Every mother, every father is different. Everyone's needs are different. But ultimately we're all trying to reach the same goal, which is to raise our children to be successful not only in school but as adults."

The 26 centers throughout Allegheny County partner with parents to create safe, healthy homes. They offer family activities, parenting techniques and child development guides, information about available resources; they help parents set and meet educational and financial goals.

Robinson volunteered at the Homewood Brushton Center long before she was hired full-time in July as a family aide and before she had her own child. When her son Devon was born two months early, with holes in his heart, she knew she needed help. She's a single parent, and she felt overwhelmed: She worried about Devon's health and cognitive development, as well as her own well-being. The center was the first place that popped into her head.

"I knew they had programs and resources and people willing to help. As a single parent, you feel like you're in it all alone. But just because you're a single parent doesn't mean you have to do it singlehandedly."

According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, 43.5 percent of single mothers in Pittsburgh live in poverty, compared to 14.4 percent of single fathers, and 4.5 percent of married couple households. Identifying what resources are available and where can be difficult; trying to balance work and child-care even more so. Full-time care for a child in Pennsylvania carries an average annual bill of \$10,391 according to nonprofit Child Care Aware of America. Rather than spend thousands of dollars on childcare, 29 percent of moms choose to stay at home, according to the Pew Research Center. For single moms, that's not an option.

Robinson works two full-time jobs. She spends her days at the Homewood Brushton Family Support Center and nights as a resident advisor in a community rehab residence. She'd like to let go of her night job, but can't—\$600 of that monthly paycheck covers childcare. She doesn't get a lot of sleep. "I set a lot of alarms, and I put everything in my calendar."

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To keep everything in balance, Robinson depends on the network she's created through the Homewood Brushton Center. Beyond its official mission, the center offers what she was missing: a community of people going through the same things. She and her friends take the kids to the park or the movies; they check in on each other. Robinson's friends text her throughout the day to help her stay on track.

Devon enters kindergarten this fall, and Robinson thinks this is the summer she'll have to take the training wheels off his bike, though it makes her nervous. Not the inevitable falls and bruises and tears, but what a bike with just two wheels means.

"If he doesn't need training wheels, then he just goes!" Thinking of Devon rolling down the street alone, she said, "I don't know if I'm ready for it. I guess I have to get ready. Because eventually he's going to ask me to take them off."

* * *

Robert Hoover's childhood didn't have training wheels.

"I grew up with both my parents, but in a household where a lot of drugs were sold—having my door kicked in, my house raided, stuff like that," he said. "I wanted to take what I went through growing up and give back to kids."

Hoover, 21, is a youth support partner (YSP), one of 25 in a unit that's part of Allegheny County's Department of Human Services. Each year, they work with more than 600 youth, ages 13–21, involved with juvenile detention, child welfare, homeless service, behavioral health or a combination of those—places the YSPs have experienced for themselves.

On the wall by the office door is the Youth Support Partner Unit's vision statement: "We will be positive role models who support, empower and motivate youth, families and other professionals by using our experience as a guide."

The office is staffed by young adults for whom juvenile detention is not a distant memory; for whom foster care has an address and a name; and for whom homelessness conjures up memories of time and place and people.

Being able to say to a kid, "I've been



where you are and here's the other side," is crucial, said Aaron Thomas, 36, who manages professional development for the unit and is Hoover's boss. "It builds hope," and helps youth learn how to advocate for themselves.

YSPs ask adolescents what they want, what they hope for (questions many of the kids are never asked). And the YSP helps them figure out how to reach those goals with concrete steps, such as applying for a driver's permit or school or a job.

Having a YSP is voluntary, but if an adolescent says yes, Hoover said developing a relationship with his kids is the most important—and hard-

est—thing he can do. It boils down to persistence. He calls once a week. He'll show up at someone's house or at someone's placement. If the youth doesn't respond, he'll leave a business card, leave a message, try again.

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100 Percent Pittsburgh

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“Showing a kid that you’re here for the long run, you’re here for the right reasons, and you’re here because you want to be here, not just because he’s on your caseload, is very, very important.”

For Hoover, his own probation officer made him feel he could be who he wanted to be, and wasn’t just a file folder of information to be moved along.

“I think he genuinely cared about his kids. He always asked me what I wanted to do career-wise. He sent me listings and listings of job opportunities, job fairs.”

Hoover wants to do the same. A kid who gets in trouble probably didn’t get there on his or her own, and probably can’t get out alone, either.

Addressing disparity in the Pittsburgh region requires collective effort, said King, of The Pittsburgh Foundation, and the time is now.

“There’s a tremendous amount of anger at the fact that a lot of people have been left out. I hear more upset and anger about conditions that we need to fix. I hear people being more ambitious and excited and committed. That anger can turn into energy for positive ends. It’s personally important to every one of us to tackle this.” **P G**

Margaret J. Krauss is a writer and radio producer based in Pittsburgh.

Elsie Hillman Civic Forum

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students, university administrators and regional leaders gathered for the inaugural student Never a Spectator event. This was the institute’s Elsie Forum “coming-out party” to introduce Pitt students to the forum.

Chancellor Emeritus and Institute Chair Mark Nordenberg welcomed the crowd, and John Denny described Elsie to the students, capturing her warmth, compassion, political prowess and infectious sense of humor. Michael Tubbs, a young councilman from Stockton, Calif., spoke of the importance of involving young people in civic life. Students then interacted with regional dignitaries about their vision for Pittsburgh, why young people are critical to fulfilling that vision and how we can engage young people in Pittsburgh’s ongoing transformation.

Elsie’s essence filled the room. I thought how excited and impressed she would be with the academically diverse students who assembled to learn about her and how they, too, can make their mark in our region through the Elsie Forum. I have often thought that if Elsie had a power color it would be “sparkle.”

As I looked around the room that evening, I saw hope and a bright outlook in the faces of the future leaders of her beloved Pittsburgh. How very pleased she would