



BERKS COUNTY  
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

# History of the Foundation

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Berks County Community Foundation administers hundreds of funds and has assets of more than \$60 million.

But more than two decades ago, a group of Berks County leaders was figuring out what exactly a community foundation does. How would it work? What role would it play in the community?

The Council on Foundations defines community foundations as tax-exempt public charities serving thousands of people who share a common interest — improving the quality of life in their area.

Foundations invest and administer charitable funds established by people who want to help their region meet the unique challenges it faces. Volunteer boards made up of individuals who are interested in identifying those challenges oversee the foundations.

But community foundations do much more than administer funds. They also identify emerging issues and use their resources to assert an important leadership role in their communities.

In the early 1990s, Berks County had no such organization. But that was about to change.

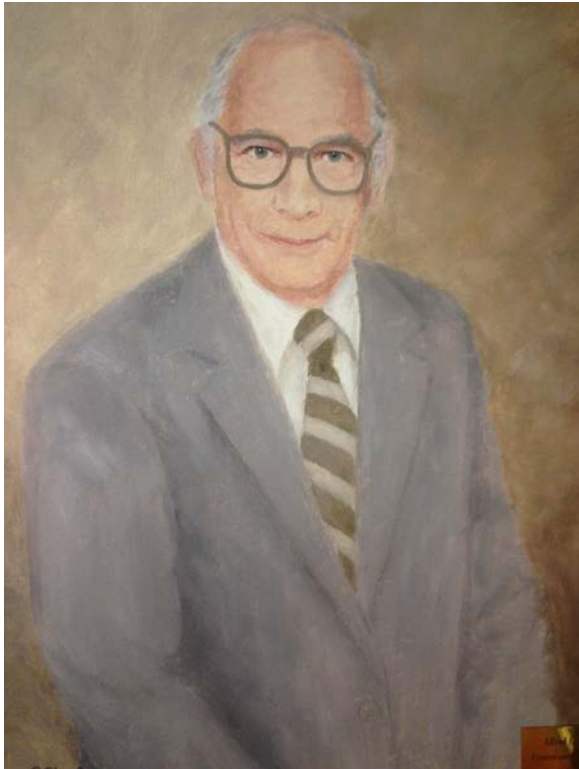
## **The Beginning**

Hildegard “Boots” Ryals, a member of the board of the Wyomissing Foundation, also served on the board of a community foundation in North Carolina. She asked the Wyomissing Foundation’s board of directors why Berks County didn’t have a community foundation. The Wyomissing Foundation’s board was intrigued, and began to look into it.

Wyomissing Foundation volunteer Alfred Hemmerich was excited by the idea. He took it upon himself to explore how a community foundation worked and whether or not it would be possible to start one in Berks County.

“Alfred was a big man, as well as an energetic man,” said J. William Widing III, who served as the Community Foundation’s attorney when it was created and is currently its board chairman. “He was motivated by a vision, he was committed to it, and he pursued it with as much energy as I’ve seen anybody pursue anything.”

Hemmerich knew he couldn’t set up a foundation on his own. He employed the help of Eugene Struckhoff, a former president of the Council on Foundations. Hemmerich also relied on a steering committee made up of Widing and other community members who were interested in forming a community foundation in Berks County.



*Alfred Hemmerich*

The late Sidney Kline, a former board member, once said Hemmerich’s enthusiasm alone was enough to convince many people to join him.

“If Alfred asked you to get involved with something, you did it. Most people did,” he said.

Berks County Community Foundation’s articles of incorporation were filed June 7, 1994.

Ten incorporators — all members of the steering committee — signed the document: Thomas A. Beaver, Nancy V. Giles, Alfred G. Hemmerich, Sidney D. Kline, Karen A. Rightmire, June A. Roedel, William K. Runyeon, David L. Thun, Donald van Roden and J. William Widing III.

“The original vision was to establish a place where people could develop a foundation with some donor-advised funds, rather than developing their own personal family foundations,” said original board member Karen Rightmire. “So it was a really easy, good way for people who wanted to make gifts in perpetuity, or to make charitable gifts, to do it through the foundation.”

Many of the Community Foundation’s first board members were also on the board of the Wyomissing Foundation, including Tom Beaver, who said the Wyomissing Foundation’s willingness to give the young community foundation \$1 million in initial operating funds was a pivotal moment.

The Wyomissing Foundation wasn't the only group helping the Community Foundation get on its feet. The United Way of Berks County incubated the Community Foundation, said Rightmire, who is now retired as president of the United Way of Berks County.

"The (Community) Foundation's staff lived in our offices for more than two years until they were ready to afford a space," she said.



*In 1995, Berks County Community Foundation was being incubated in the offices of the United Way of Berks County. In the front row left, Community Foundation President Kevin K. Murphy is far outnumbered by United Way employees.*

Rightmire said she was interested in being involved in the foundation because it had some of the same goals as the United Way, and she thought the two groups could get more done if they worked together.

Though the fledgling foundation received help from other groups, it needed to attract more money if it was going to start building a significant endowment fund.

A team of people approached corporations, banks and other resources in the area, and explained to them what the Community Foundation was and what its goals were, and solicited seed money from them to build up the foundation's corpus, former board member Donald van Roden said.

"They weren't large sums... but they were meaningful, and it was amazing how many of these organizations were willing to participate," he said.

Alfred Hemmerich passed away in 1999, but his legacy lives on through the foundation he

worked so hard to create.

“I think he would be very proud of what has been accomplished, and justifiably so,” said Kline.

One of the first important decisions the Community Foundation’s board of directors made was hiring a president for the organization.

### **The Foundation’s President**

When he accepted the job of Berks County Community Foundation president in 1994, Kevin K. Murphy thought he would work at the foundation for a couple of years and then move on.

But two decades later, his passion for philanthropy has never been stronger. Murphy cites the foundation’s ability to go beyond grantmaking and make a major impact on local issues as the cause of his maintained interest.

“I think what we didn’t anticipate was the extent to which community foundations all across the country, really all across the world, would be thrust into leadership roles in their communities,” Murphy said.

After interviewing him, Alfred Hemmerich immediately liked Murphy for the job.

“A key moment was when we hired Kevin Murphy,” said Sidney Kline. “It had to be somebody like Kevin, who had a vision for fundraising, helping guide agencies, seeing the needs of a community, and knowing where the best places for the use of the money would be.”

But Murphy credits his wife as the reason people were so keen to have him come on board.

“The folks who ran the foundation were very fond of my wife, who was the director of development at the Penn State Berks campus,” Murphy said. “They were very eager to keep her in the community and eager to find me a job working in this community so that we would be more rooted here.”

Hemmerich pursued Murphy tirelessly, and though Murphy said the idea sounded “a little wacky” to him in the beginning, he became impressed by the passion and commitment displayed by everyone involved with the foundation.

### **Making a Difference**

With more than 300 charitable funds, and about \$3 million in grants distributed every year, the Community Foundation finds itself involved in all kinds of causes. From funds pertaining to youth and environmental issues to health and downtown revitalization, the foundation is associated with almost every sector of life in Berks County.

“I think the project that we’ve done that’s attracted the most national attention has been the work that we did in helping the community start to really effectively preserve farmland,” Murphy said.

In 1998, Berks County residents were worried about protecting the farmland that is integral to the way they think about Berks County.

“If you ask people what they love about Berks County, they’ll say, ‘You can be in the city and then 10 minutes later you can be driving around in the rolling farmlands and see the great vistas, and visit the farm stands,’” Murphy said. “So there were a lot of groups trying to figure out how to preserve that land.”



*A Berks County farm*

But the groups had different goals and priorities. One of the biggest hurdles was getting them to come up with cohesive objectives for farmland preservation, Murphy said. Using a grant of about \$4,000, the foundation brought in a consultant who worked with the groups until they had developed one goal, which was to preserve 200,000 acres of farmland.

At that time, the county was spending about \$1 million a year to buy conservation easements – guarantees from farmers that their land would never be developed.

“One million a year was sort of like trying to bail out the ocean with a Dixie cup,” said Murphy. “It was woefully insignificant and there was not much chance that we were going to succeed in this before the developers had developed everything in sight.”

Murphy encouraged county commissioners to use the \$1 million to borrow money so they could start buying more conservation easements before more land was developed. By the end of the year, the commissioners floated a \$35 million bond issue that, with matching grants from the state, led to about \$50 million being spent on farmland conservation in Berks County over a five-year period. At the end of that period, the Community Foundation reconvened the interested parties. They re-evaluated their goals, and another \$35 million bond was floated with matching state grants.

“A \$4,000 grant that ultimately triggered about \$100 million in state and federal

investment took us from a community that was in danger of losing its farmland to one that will always have it,” Murphy said. “I think that’s an example of where a grant has had a huge impact.”

Farmland isn’t the only aspect of Berks County’s environment that the foundation is concerned about. Being on the forefront of the environmental preservation efforts being made by the county and the state is very important to the foundation. Through the Metropolitan Edison Company Sustainable Energy (Met Ed) Fund, the Community Foundation has been on the forefront of the implementation of wind-generated energy in Pennsylvania.

The Community Foundation has also made the health of Berks County residents a top priority. Using money from Community General Hospital, which transferred its foundation to the Community Foundation after it closed in 1997, the Community Foundation commissioned a study of the health of people living in Berks County. Because of that study, the foundation has been able to pinpoint health concerns and react to them. Programs spawned from that study include funding a health clinic, promotion of early prenatal care for pregnant women and a program designed to combat obesity by encouraging children to exercise and learn about proper nutrition.

The revitalization of the City of Reading has been important to the Community Foundation since its inception, too. “It’s important for people to realize that an attractive downtown area is not an amenity,” Murphy said. “It’s a necessity if you want to attract young people to the community and keep up with nationwide trends.”

“The pendulum in this country has begun to swing away from suburban sprawl because young people don’t really like strip shopping centers,” Murphy said. “They’re not quite as enamored with suburban tract housing as their parents were, and they’re much more attracted to cool urban spaces.”

In 2004, a new board of commissioners and a new mayor were elected. They identified that Reading didn’t have a coherent plan for economic development and job creation. They asked the Community Foundation to start the Initiative for a Competitive Greater Reading (ICGR), which sought to discover how Reading’s economy would need to change to keep up with changing times.

ICGR was unique because it used data to pinpoint what jobs areas were likely to continue growing and which areas of the county should be focused on, Murphy said.

Penn Avenue, also called the Corridor, was one of the areas ICGR focused on. The corridor leads from Wyomissing to downtown Reading, and when the ICGR group identified it as a portion of the city that needed to be focused on, it affirmed the foundation’s belief that a “vibrant urban core” was a prerequisite to attracting jobs that will power the economy in the future, Murphy said.

Though it’s too early to judge the results of ICGR, Murphy said there has been wide

community acceptance of the program's goals and ideas, and the fact that the community has started to focus on how to improve its economic development is a victory in and of itself.

The Community Foundation is not immune to controversy. In 2007, Berks County District Attorney Mark C. Baldwin gave \$1 million seized from drug dealers to the Community Foundation to start a fund called the Berks County District Attorneys Anti-Drug Fund, which supports enforcement of the state's drug laws.

It was a controversial fund because there were many people who would have rather had the money themselves instead of it coming to the Community Foundation.

In March 2009, the foundation received its largest gift ever from Myrtle B. Quier, former chair of the board of Reading Eagle Company. In her will, Quier bequeathed more than \$10 million to the foundation to create the Hawley and Myrtle Quier Fund. She also donated a significant stake in Reading Eagle Company.

"I thought the contribution from Mrs. Quier was a wonderful example of how the Community Foundation is appreciated, that a person is willing to help perpetuate and do good things in the community through the foundation," said van Roden.

Another important program the Community Foundation sponsors has made it easier for Berks County's young people to get involved with philanthropy.

### **Youth Advisory Committee**

Young Berks Countians looking to get involved in philanthropy have their own oasis within the Community Foundation. The Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) has given teenagers the opportunity to make a difference. Since its inception in 1998, in any given year about 30 Berks County high school students learn the ins and outs of grantmaking, fundraising and volunteerism. YACsters create requests for proposals, go on site visits and then reconvene to discuss how they want to spend their \$15,000 budget. "They have to kind of duke it out amongst themselves about how that money will be allocated," said Murphy.

Jake Fromm, a graduate of Wyomissing High School, had the opportunity to attend a philanthropy conference in Togliatti, Russia through the YAC program. Fromm met with Russian teenagers who were involved in similar youth philanthropy programs.

"It was just really cool. From across the world, these kids were doing the exact same thing, and that really stands out," he said. "I learned that communities all over the world are doing this."





*A 2012 visit to Russia with some YACsters*

The teenagers also do their own fundraising with the hopes of permanently endowing the program. By soliciting members of the community for funds, YACsters have raised over a quarter of a million dollars.

Though YAC began as a small, experimental program, it has turned into “one of the signature programs of this community foundation,” Murphy said, adding teenagers bring a lot of energy and a fresh perspective to the Community Foundation.

“The theory here is that we’re teaching these kids about community philanthropy and how community works and teaching them the skills of allocating the resources, but I have to say that pretty consistently, year in, year out, we find ourselves learning a lot more from these kids than I think we’re teaching them,” he said.

“I think someday, the man or woman who’s sitting at my desk will probably be a former Berks County Community Foundation YACster,” he said.

It isn’t just the YACsters who have exchanged ideas internationally.

### **An International Foundation**

In 2001, Kevin Murphy was invited by the German Marshall Fund to be a fellow in their transcontinental community foundation fellowship program, which was designed to send American community foundation CEOs to Europe and European community foundation CEOs to America to learn from each other.

When Murphy first learned he was going to be one of the fellows, he and his wife were expecting a Western European vacation.

“She was picking out where she wanted to be in Paris,” Murphy said, “and I got an e-mail that said, ‘Well, we’d like you to go to Togliatti, Russia.’”

Murphy had never heard of Togliatti, an industrial city about 600 miles south of Moscow, which housed Russia’s first community foundation, founded in 1998. Though the location

wouldn't have been on Murphy's shortlist of desired destinations, Eastern Europe was the area most in need of help in understanding how to create and run a community foundation.

Murphy spent a few weeks with the Russian foundation's staff, giving them his perspective on how best to run a community foundation. But he's learned from the Russians as well.

"To say that I kind of fell in love with their ideas, and I think they became really attached to the way this community foundation had developed, would probably be an understatement," he said, adding there are many ideas this foundation has taken from the Russians that couldn't have germinated in Pennsylvania, and vice versa.

Murphy has seen his Russian counterparts so much since that first visit that he's lost track of the number of times he's visited Togliatti, or they've visited Reading.

Berks County Community Foundation now has relationships with 35 Russian community foundations. Through these relationships, "you understand that Americans are sort of born with doctorates in philanthropy," Murphy said. "We already understand the idea that we should give money back to the community, that we should support our churches, that if there's a challenge facing our community we need to come together and sit and talk about it."

Soviet rule, which ended less than 10 years before the Togliatti Community Foundation was created, restricted Russians from convening to do charitable deeds.

"If there was any place where you could just say there are people who aren't charitable, it would have been Russia," Murphy said. But working with the Russians affirms the idea that philanthropy isn't just an American phenomenon.

Seeing the Russians tap into that need to help one another after it was repressed for more than 70 years shows just how universal philanthropy is, and inspires Murphy to find ways to inspire everyone to contribute to the community, he said.

"When we see somebody in the community who is not engaged in contributing either financially or intellectually to the community, we cannot take the position that it's because there's something wrong or different about them," he said. "We have to understand that it's because we haven't found the way yet that's important and interesting to them."

If environmentally-friendly buildings are important and interesting to you, the Community Foundation's got something you'll want to see.

## **Going Green**

"When we started saying we were going to build a green building, I actually had a college president say to me that he had built a lot of buildings, but he had never started by picking the exterior color," Murphy said.

But in this case, “green” refers not to the color but to the environmentally-friendly aspects of the Community Foundation’s building at 237 Court Street, which opened in 2009.



*A green roof at the Community Foundation headquarters, at left. The building was dedicated in 2009, at right.*

Since the Community Foundation operates many funds concerning the environment and often advocates for environmentally-friendly measures, it was only natural that its new home should use green technology.

The new building was the first of its kind in the city.

“We said ‘Nobody’s ever built a green building around here because nobody’s ever built a green building around here.’ And nobody knows what one looks like and nobody understands the benefits of it,” Murphy said.

The novelty of a green building initially elicited mocking from some — “the hippies are building a green building for themselves” — and confusion from others who didn’t understand what a green buildings was.

One of the new building’s environmentally-friendly features is its ability to catch rainwater that falls on the roof and use it as part of the building’s water supply, a move that reduced the building’s water use by about 80 percent. The building is also positioned to make the most out of the light streaming into the windows. On a sunny day about 80 percent of the building’s light is provided by natural sunlight.

“You could go to some considerable expense to build a combination of walls and windows to keep that sunlight out, and then go buy electricity to create artificial sunlight,” Murphy said. “Or you could be smart about letting that sunlight in, and cut down on your electric bill by, in our case, almost half over the course of the year.”

### **Downtown momentum**

Though the Community Foundation has long supported the revitalization of downtown Reading, and specifically Penn Street, that effort has found recent success.

The foundation board agreed to fund a Fire + Ice Fest event in 2015 and 2016 and a free concert series called Downtown Alive in August, September and October 2015. In addition, the foundation is supporting ReDesign Reading, a community development corporation that has reinvigorated a downtown farmers market, spawned the Reading Bike Hub pop-up shop and community center, and enticed a professional cycling race to return to Reading.

While many of the foundation's arts grants have targeted underserved rural areas, but many also are being used to bring vibrancy to Penn Street through a series of unique programs, such as a full-length musical at Fifth and Penn, the intersection at the heart of Berks County.

### **Looking back, looking forward**

Two decades after they started the foundation, its founders aren't yet satisfied with their creation. They want to see it do even more good for the community.

"I would very much like this foundation to have enough of a fund balance that its gifts to the community would rival what we're able to give through the United Way," Tom Beaver said, adding that would require at least between \$160 and \$180 million. "That's my dream, I think that would just be terrific," he said. Beaver thinks that goal is possible, but it would require a number of large gifts in a short period of time.

Widing, the current board chairman, said it's important to him that the foundation maintain its vision and energy, and that it remains in existence indefinitely, because "that'll mean that philanthropy, which I think is one of the strongest of American products, is still going strong, and still a vibrant part of our culture."

"I see great things for the Community Foundation and I think Berks County is like a canvas ready to be painted upon," said Karen Rightmire. "I believe that the Community Foundation will be one of those organizations that play a key role in that."

Murphy sees a bright future ahead for the Community Foundation.

"Community foundations are really emerging as the leadership institutions that have the ability to think about the future of their community," he said. "They have the independence to challenge the status quo, and we'll be solidifying that."

"I would want my successor 100 years from now to understand that this institution was created by forward-thinking people to be a vehicle that can continually look for ways to make this place better," Murphy said. "If this community foundation ever becomes an institution that simply supports the status quo, that doesn't challenge the community to dream bigger dreams, then it has failed."