

# LESSONS LEARNED

from the

## BOOMER MENTORS INITIATIVE



ROCHESTER, NY • MAY 2014



THE  
COMMUNITY  
FOUNDATION

community**experience**  
PARTNERSHIP

About the National Project

In 2006, The Atlantic Philanthropies created the Community Experience Partnership (CEP) to explore the issue of engaging older adults in social change through a model based on collaboration between community foundations and their partners. From April 2008 to June 2013, CEP collaborators tackled older adult engagement through a variety of community issues across the nation, from immigrant engagement in California, to homelessness in Grand Rapids, to mentoring in Rochester. To learn about other projects, visit [www.ceplearning.org](http://www.ceplearning.org).

“Boomer Mentors connected the rich talent of our older adults to the needs of urban youth using a proven method of academic improvement. We also strengthened the area’s mentoring system.”

JENNIFER LEONARD  
President & CEO  
Rochester Area Community Foundation

CONTENTS

Overview	2
Rochester Lessons Learned	5
Next Steps	11
National Lessons Learned	11

About the Rochester Project

Summary

From 2009 to 2013, the partners of the Boomer Mentors initiative planned and executed a campaign to recruit Baby Boomers as mentors for Rochester youth, with the goal of engaging the Boomer generation in social change while addressing the disparity in high school graduation rates between urban and suburban students. Mentoring has been shown to improve academic outcomes in at-risk youth.

Our early goal was to strengthen the existing Rochester Mentors alliance so that it could lead the way on a mentoring system with key roles for Baby Boomers. Our tactics included efforts to recruit and retain Boomer-aged mentors, show them how they can make an important difference in the lives of young people, and increase the number of students with mentors in the Rochester City School District, where the demand for mentors exceeds the supply.

A total of 391 people contacted Rochester Mentors between January 2010 and June 2012. More than half (57 percent) were older adults age 50-plus. Of those who contacted Rochester Mentors, 59 percent attended an information session. Almost all who attended a session (87 percent) were referred to one or more mentoring programs for more information. The number who ultimately became mentors did not reach the early goal of 200, but leaders of the Community Experience Partnership initiative didn’t see this as a failure. Each project had ambitious goals, said CEP Manager James Gillis; the reality is that it’s hard work to engage Boomers in significant ways.

As the initiative progressed, staff discovered that volunteers needed opportunities with more flexibility than full-year, one-on-one mentoring commitments. For prospective volunteers whose travel, work-family needs, or other commitments prohibited a long-term mentoring relationship, Rochester Mentors provided other opportunities to get involved. This included one-time events with a community engagement focus and creative ways to support existing mentor-mentee pairs. During the initiative’s final stages, the Community Foundation and its project partners explored ways to expand opportunities for older adults to identify how they could put their interests, talents, and skills to work to address community issues.

Partners

Initiative partners included Rochester Area Community Foundation with Lifespan of Greater Rochester and others: The Atlantic Philanthropies’ Community Experience Partnership (CEP), Ad Council of Rochester, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Compeer, Generation 2, New Life Fellowship’s Directions to Destiny, Successful Pathways, and Women Helping Girls. Our advisory committee included representatives from the City of Rochester, Monroe County Office for the Aging, the Monroe County Youth Bureau, the Rochester City School District, the United Way of Greater Rochester, and mentoring organizations.

Funding

The Community Foundation raised \$359,730 in matching funds. Combined with The Atlantic Philanthropies’ grant, \$728,000 was committed to the initiative over the implementation period. After the grant funding for Boomer Mentors ended, the effort was transitioned to the Rochester/ Monroe County Youth Bureau.



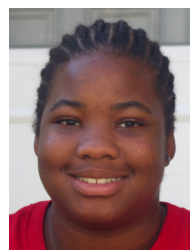


# Dorothy & Jessica



Dorothy

“We have funny times, we have serious times. Mentoring is like distilling the highlights of parenting into a few hours a week. You get the cream — an appreciative, eager young person who listens.”



Jessica

“She’s like a human Wikipedia. I have a problem, and she knows the answer. She gives me a lot of useful advice.”

Our ongoing work is guided by lessons that Rochester Area Community Foundation and our partners learned from the Boomer Mentors initiative and from other older adult engagement projects happening simultaneously around the country. We want to share these findings in hopes of helping others who seek to engage Baby Boomers in community issues.

## Rochester Lessons Learned

### 1 Baby Boomers are an important and growing community asset, but they aren’t being fully tapped.

Most communities lack the supports and structures needed to mobilize and connect people over age 60 to efforts that address serious social issues. Organizations need help learning best practices for recruiting and retaining older adults. Meanwhile, being involved in purposeful activity with others makes for a healthier and more satisfying life as we age.

Multiple barriers exist to civic engagement, including transportation, health, attitude, and lack of information. Seniors are a diverse group, so one-size-fits-all solutions won’t be effective. On the plus side, we can build on the Rochester area’s strong history of community service and on the talents and experience of older adults themselves.

### 2 Collaboration strengthens the work.

We convened partners with expertise, including groups that serve older adults, youth, and minority populations as well as mentoring agencies, Rochester City School District, United Way, local government representatives, and older adult mentors. Lifespan, an aging services provider, served as a skilled and neutral managing partner of the initiative, fostering collaboration rather than competition, which was important for agencies that could be in competition for volunteers. The partners brought diverse perspectives to a true partnership, took ownership of the initiative, and benefited from new bonds that formed between participating organizations.

Our planning team workgroups gathered and shared best practices in mentoring and older adult engagement, created a social marketing strategy to attract Boomers as mentors, and focused on sustainability so the effort would continue beyond the grant period.





## Randall & Luke



Randall

“The good part is honestly the relationship I’m forming with him. It hasn’t been all laughs and jokes. I’m excited for him for the next year. I see that potential that’s sitting there.”



Luke

“I just learned a lot about life. I learned from my mistakes, and from him helping me through my mistakes. He’s my mentor, but he’s more than that. He’s a friend.”

### 3 Leverage existing community strengths, rather than build something new.

We expanded the informal Rochester Mentors network of mentoring program leaders to become a place for peer learning, training, and capacity building. We shared information about best practices for recruiting and retaining older adults and building varied engagement strategies.

We used the Rochester Mentors phone line, website, and email as the bridge to connect older adult volunteers to mentoring, making Rochester Mentors a single source that potential volunteers could contact for information and help selecting a mentoring organization that matched their talents and desire. Building on existing efforts was more efficient and sustainable. Having Rochester Mentors as a source of referrals reduced member organizations’ need to dedicate staff resources to recruitment.

### 4 Free publicity and word of mouth were most effective for recruitment.

Our recruitment campaign included television ads, videos, billboards, radio, and free publicity to help raise awareness about the need for mentors. Older adults were targeted through the pictures chosen and the tagline, “You have what it takes to be a mentor.” The media campaign increased recognition of Rochester Mentors within the community and brought attention to mentoring, but didn’t deliver large numbers of mentors. Mentoring is an intensive and long-term commitment, so we learned that an ad isn’t enough if people don’t already have some inclination to become a mentor. Most new Boomer Mentors heard of the need through a trusted friend or group, or through stories and “Speaking Out” opinion pieces in the *Democrat and Chronicle* daily newspaper. Other outreach and recruitment activities — such as speaking to local groups — proved effort intensive and delivered a relatively small number of new mentors.

### 5 Build a relationship from the beginning.

Recruitment is most effective when you provide a prompt, personal response by phone to inquiries from prospective volunteers. Fostering social connections among mentors through training and peer support opportunities contributes to older adults’ satisfaction and desire to continue mentoring. Recognize and communicate how volunteers’ involvement is making a difference.



# Hope & Tanaysia



Hope

“I think I still have a lot to offer, and I love kids. You really form a great friendship. Everything emanates from that.”



Tanaysia

“Hope taught me how to cook.” (Not only have Hope and Tanaysia made donuts and dinners, they’ve gardened, played Scrabble, sewed a pillow, and laughed together.)

## 6 Offer flexible options — and listen.

We attracted some people who wanted to support mentoring but couldn’t commit to becoming a mentor themselves. We created monthly “Potential Connections” forums where people could explore their interests, which brought unexpected support such as a ballroom owner who donated space for mentoring events and others who became mentoring advocates. One adult who participated in the forums recruited 15 other people to consider mentoring — and to become more engaged with the community.

We learned the importance of not recruiting older adults for a specific role, but instead engaging them with the cause and seeing where their interests, experience, connections, and resources can be put to use. They may bring new perspective and possibilities. Be ready to respond to the different ways people want to help so you don’t lose them as a resource.

## 7 Engaging deeply with this issue continues to have ripple effects.

Rochester’s initiative staff provided networking opportunities and technical assistance to 14 other community organizations considering mentoring programs. Sharing best practices helped some programs realize they weren’t equipped to launch a high-quality mentoring program and would do better to collaborate with others. New Life Fellowship Church in Rochester is an example of one that did start a mentor program, Directions to Destiny, guided by our project director. Those we helped include:

Baber AME Church

Discovery Charter School

Greece Olympia High School (GO FAR)

JAREI - Jefferson Avenue Revive Education  
Initiative with County Legislator Willie  
Lightfoot, Jr.

Junior Academy Center

Monroe County Youth Bureau - Transition  
Mentors

New Life Fellowship - Directions to Destiny

Rochester Police Department

Rochester Educational Resource Center

Rochester Hispanic Youth Baseball League

RochesterWorks

UPREP Charter School

Volunteers of America

YWCA of Rochester

By designing and implementing this initiative, the Community Foundation strengthened its ability to work strategically with older adults and raised community awareness of the Foundation as a resource in the aging field. The Foundation added aging to its interest areas and plans to increase the dollars it grants to the aging field. A new culture emerged within the Foundation that encourages consideration of older adults as a resource in addressing community issues across interest areas. Likewise, participating foundations around the country have a new emphasis on older adult civic engagement and on the topics they explored. The learning community model was so helpful that elements are being copied for other projects.





# Mary Ellen & Kalana



Mary Ellen

“She adds a special something to my life. I care about her deeply.”



Kalana

“She’s a fun person. I’ll call her just to talk with her.” (This duo also likes to go shopping, go to the movies, and take returnable cans back to the store.)

## Next Steps

At the close of the Rochester initiative in January 2013, Patricia Campbell of the Community Foundation and other stakeholders were focused on sustaining and building on the groundwork of this initiative. This included more intensive study and exploration of the development of older adult engagement strategies to fit within existing Rochester structures.

Meanwhile, due to the strong partnerships formed by this initiative, Rochester Mentors has found a sustainable home at the Rochester/Monroe County Youth Bureau.

## National Lessons Learned

Based on its projects across the nation, The Atlantic Philanthropies’ Community Experience Partnership compiled keys to successful engagement of older adults to drive change and meet important needs in the communities where they live:

- Start at the grassroots, local level so the effort is place-based, holistic, and inclusive. Give voice to all involved and share decision-making, which older adults value. Partner across sectors, because relationships are at the core of this work.
- Focus on an issue that resonates with older adults. Have multiple points of entry for older adult involvement. Be flexible and responsive.
- Build on the strengths and assets of older adults.
- Use community assessments and planning to create a strong foundation for action and engagement.
- Look for measurable impact to show the difference being made and promote continuous improvement.
- Keep learning.

For more information about the Boomer Mentors initiative, contact Community Programs Director Patricia Campbell at **585.341.4355** or **pcampbell@racf.org**.

“We realized it’s not about  
recruiting someone to a particular  
job description, it’s about  
recruiting someone to a cause.”

**JEFF NEWLAND**

1964 - 2013

Director, Boomer Mentors  
Lifespan of Greater Rochester

*This report is dedicated to Jeff Newland’s memory.*

### **About the Community Foundation**

Rochester Area Community Foundation works to improve the quality of life in the greater Rochester region by evaluating and addressing community issues, promoting strategic philanthropy, and connecting donors to critical local needs. For more information, visit us online at **[www.racf.org](http://www.racf.org)**.



THE  
COMMUNITY  
FOUNDATION