Focus on the Region

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Sue Bruer joins WCI Board

Newest WCI Board Member Sue Bruer is business manager of the Common Cup, the popular nonprofit coffeehouse in downtown Morris. “I started as a part-time server and ended up managing,” she laughs. She lives in nearby Alberta where she is active at local Trinity Lutheran Church.

Sue grew up in Illinois. She and her husband Mike worked near Chicago. When they started a family, they wanted their kids to have a more rural upbringing. They made the decision to farm with Mike’s family near Alberta. It was a decision that worked. They never left.

Sue enjoys reading and finding hidden treasures in flea markets, “trying to exercise” and fixing up her house – think painting, tiling and the like. And she loves her work with Common Cup.

“Sue brings a wealth of experience to bear on the important work of our governing board and she will provide us with a better understanding of the communities and people of Stevens County. We’re so grateful for Sue’s volunteer spirit and commitment,” said WCI President Anna Wasescha.

News Briefs

Congratulations to Nancy Jost, who received a Friend of the Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities (CGMC) Award for helping to advance proposals aimed at addressing the child care shortage that has become a serious impediment to business and community growth in Greater Minnesota. Read about Nancy and her award at blog.wcif.org.

What does a change-making idea look like? In west central Minnesota, it looks like local foods initiatives, inclusion training, arts activities, tackling trash, community conversations and more. These are the 26 projects that WCI awarded this spring in its latest Community Change Makers grant round that impact 16-plus communities. Meet our grantees at wcif.org/change-makers-grants.html.

Putting “Think Globally, Act Locally” to the Test

WCI President Anna Wasescha’s passion for healthy soil, clean water, and fresh air started in 1992 when she spent a semester in Beijing, China. She never saw blue sky once during the entire four months. When she returned to her home in St. Paul, she was determined to do something to improve the natural environment for people living in densely populated urban spaces. The path forward centered on people, land, and sustainability. That is why, in the mid-90s, she founded a nonprofit organization named Farm in the City. As it grew, one community garden on a tract of parkland spread to other tracts of available land, from vacant lots to school grounds to big backyards. Farm in the City was part community garden, part community-supported agriculture. It served as an outdoor learning laboratory for children and youth and as a place for people of many ages and cultures to interact and work together.

But first and foremost, it was about growing community. When she moved to west central Minnesota, with its big skies, many lakes, vast farmland, and even a noticeable diversity of population in cities such as Pelican Rapids, Moorhead, and Morris, she began translating what she learned from her Farm in the City experience to an entire region.

Her lessons boil down to caring for the land, water, and people so that all thrive.

It’s a simple concept, yet ambitious and global in both scale and impact. In fact, it’s one the United Nations is working on now through its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In 2015, all 193 sovereign states of the UN General Assembly ratified what it calls a “shared blueprint” to meet 17 SDGs by the year 2030 (see right). Earlier this year, the WCI Board of Directors voted to incorporate the SDGs into WCI’s work as part of its fiscal years 20-21-22 strategic plan. In June, county commissioners and city council members who sit on the WCI-directed Economic Development District Board learned about the SDGs and shared what goals such as “Life Under Water” and “Good Health and Well-Being” look like in our region.

It could be called “glocalize”

So, how does a relatively small organization take on the same goals as the United Nations? WCI looked to our neighbors to the north for help.

In June, several WCI board and staff members were able to attend the Community Foundations of Canada’s (CFC) annual conference. The CFC has been working with its membership to incorporate the SDGs at a local level. The WCI attendees learned how community foundations developed awareness campaigns around the SDGs, aligned granting programs, included the SDGs in regular roundtable discussions, and focused on projects that impact the local community.

WCI.added a grant program for organisations that address the SDGs, including grants to organisations working on poverty reduction, gender equality, and climate action. By planting a seed in the minds of these local organisations, WCI hopes to help them move closer to achieving the SDGs in their own communities. WCI’s grants program is available at wcif.org/change-makers-grants.html.

SDGs continued inside.
You may not be able to tell from its unassuming warehouse-style exterior, but The Bridge Community Pantry (formerly known as The Perham Food Shelf) is getting a makeover. It started with its mission, and then its name.

Led by Rich McCrady six years ago, the board established four initiatives: human resources and operations, public relations/marketing, outreach, and facilities.

The Outreach Initiative tackled how to better serve the neighboring towns of Richville, Ottertail, Dent, and Vergas by launching a mobile pantry. So the name “Perham Food Shelf” just didn’t match their reach anymore.

“Then we rebranded as The Bridge Community Pantry, as part of the Public Relations/Marketing initiative, because we’re bridging all these small communities,” explained John Leikness, Executive Director.

The pantry itself was running out of room, so the Facilities Initiative handled that. The Perham Lions who were instrumental in getting the current building constructed generously agreed to vacate their half. This allowed The Bridge to double in size.

The current board of directors, led by Chair Fred Lehmkuhl, is guiding the expansion effort.

The entire building is now under renovation not only to better serve clients but also to store the Mobile Pantry unit. The Bridge was able to use a $5,000 WCI Community Change Makers grant to help with the expansion.

**Mission-driven**

Back to that mission. “We believe all people experience times of need in life,” it reads. “The Bridge provides a temporary food source for families and individuals, in an environment of respect, caring and optimism.”

Leikness and the 40-plus volunteers he leads take that mission to heart. “Everyone who enters The Bridge Community Pantry is considered a guest,” Leikness said. “We always introduce the volunteer to the guest because the guest is the most important person.”

From the moment they walk through the door, a volunteer greets them and walks them through the aisles where the guests get to choose their own items.

Leikness and The Bridge volunteers understand that sometimes people have a hard time making ends meet. Maybe they are new to the community and need help to tide them over until their first paycheck. Maybe expenses have piled up. Maybe something unforeseen has happened. It doesn’t really matter. The Bridge is there to help take some of the worry out of their lives.

Last year, The Bridge served 533 families. These families made 2,119 visits. Families can visit once per month if needed but most do not. “Our experience is that families used the pantry when the need arises and not unnecessarily.”

Along with the rows of canned and dry goods, there are freezers with meat and other frozen items. In the summer months, a farm-to-food shelf program helped them provide 198,000 pounds of fresh produce to their guests and the general public. In the reception area, there are books for children to read while waiting, dental care kits, donated knitted hats for cold winter days, and seed packets available during the growing season.

The Bridge uses North Country Food Bank as its main source of food. It allows them to stretch a dollar five to seven times its worth. Leikness also cited the incredible generosity of residents. There are collection spots in grocery stores and local businesses make regular food donations. Churches, businesses, service organizations and individuals generously donate allowing The Bridge to complete its mission.

“In these towns, it’s the people of the community who get it done,” Leikness said.

A strategic investment

WCI’s Director of Programs Wendy Merrick sees The Bridge as an example of WCI’s new strategic plan in motion. “The Bridge does so much more than meet a basic need for food. It models neighborhood—which is a core value of WCI—and inspires being in relationship with each another—within communities, between communities, and across the region.”

Learn more about WCI’s strategic plan at wcif.org/strategic-plan.html.

Meet our newest staff members

West Central Initiative is thrilled to welcome back Marsha Erickson as our new early childhood specialist, and we’re pleased to introduce Samantha VanWechel-Meyer as our development specialist.

Marsha was WCI’s early childhood program associate from 2002 to 2016. She joined the United Way of Otter Tail and Wadena Counties in 2016, but continued her association with WCI by serving as the Otter Tail County Early Childhood Initiative (ECI) coordinator. In her new role at WCI, Marsha works directly with all 10 ECI coordinators that are contracted by WCI to serve its nine counties and White Earth Nation. She and Director of Early Childhood Nancy Just work to strengthen the early childhood infrastructure in the region and address concerns, like the current child care shortage.

“I live and work under the credence that every child deserves a chance,” Marsha says. “Whether it is providing their basic needs, connecting them with resources or providing them with the richest education possible, our children deserve it.”

Samantha VanWechel-Meyer comes to WCI from the Fergus Falls Area YMCA where she served as membership and marketing manager. As part of the WCI’s philanthropy team, along with Director of Development Rebecca Petersen, she will manage WCI’s donor database, increase interactions among both donors and members of WCI’s donor-advised funds, and lead new outreach and community engagement efforts.

“It brings me joy to be working at WCI supporting philanthropy in west central Minnesota where I was born and raised. Through our collective giving and investments we support the growth and sustainability of our great region now and in the future,” Samantha says.