



A dedicated group saw a need in our community and didn't take no for an answer. As we celebrate the 40-year history of the Community Foundation we are thrilled to have founders share the origin story. Learn more from DSACF's first Board Chair, Kay Slack, in excerpts from a conversation with President & CEO Shaun Floerke July 18, 2023.

“Failure wasn't an option.” – Kay Slack, first DSACF board Chair

Shaun: It was early 1980s and recession and jobs and all of that. What on earth were you thinking?

Kay: Well, I think that it's all born out of experience. I was board president of the United Way and it was really tough going with fundraising that year and meeting our goals. (For years and years, it was the Y's and the Scouts and those traditional nonprofits. At the same time women's issues were coming up so there were several nonprofits just trying to get started that would also serve women.) It was kind of desperate. But I realized that other cities and towns, big and small and with community foundations, had a fallback. They could fill in the voids in hard times. So that thought kind of germinated.

Shaun: Do you remember when that would have been?

Kay: Probably 1982, maybe? Jay Hess was the head of the United Way at the time and he agreed that it was worth looking into. So we poked around and poked around and went up and down the street and asked our community leaders what they would think it about it. And mostly what we heard was, “Oh, we tried it twice before and it didn't work.”

So off we went to the Twin Cities and interviewed Foundation chairs and presidents down there and found great support in the Bush Foundation. We told them about the negative references we were getting here, and he said, “Just do it. It'll work.”

Then we needed a professional (Richard Burns) that would do our bylaws and all the paperwork, specifically community foundation-oriented, which has a lot of rules and regulations tax wise.

The Blandin Foundation said they would give us a \$25,000 grant if we did a feasibility study and matched it. So, Bev Goldfine and I thought the two of us, okay, we can raise \$25,000. We don't need a big drive. We went to Monte Goldfine and asked him for his suggestions. “Oh, simple,” he says. “You just go to five people and ask them for \$5,000.” That was a lot of money you know, in early 80s.

But to make a long story short, that worked. We got the Blandin money and we were able to hire Beulah Hess, who was just finishing up a bachelor's or a master's in business administration. She was looking for a part time job to finish her thesis and was happy to do it. She turned out to be a jewel. We couldn't have done any better if we tried.

Shaun: I see her name on stuff still.

Kay: She gave us a good foundation and good relationships with the National Foundation and the rest of the Minnesota State Foundation Group. And we were off to a good start because of Beulah and Dick (Richard Burns), who worked very close together. Dick gave us structure and Beulah carried it out and made it happen.

Shaun: How did the naysayers respond when you came back and said, "Well, we've talked to Bush and we've got a Blandin Grant, we're going to do this thing."

Kay: I think they were all happy to see a go. And we had wonderful support from the companies in town and Jack Burke from the DM&IR. Minnesota Power loaned us an executive and the telephone company and the newspaper at that time. All the movers and shakers were with us. Once we got it started, that really helped. It helped us big build credibility to be touched by all those folks.

Shaun: Yeah, those are good invites, good welcoming and good ambassadors.

Kay: The accountants' group in town and the estate planner group, you know, were behind us as well. And of course, they were key because they could hand out our brochures and talk to their clients who were interested in charitable giving.

Shaun: Were there any big surprises, early days stuff. I know it was all kind of new, you know, you're inventing or at least taking a model you haven't done before. Any big surprises?

Kay: My vision was a Duluth Community Foundation because I was thinking small. And it was Dick that first suggested including Superior. So then we went from the Duluth Community Foundation to the Duluth Superior Community Foundation, and then a few years later with staff awareness of what was going on and requests from small communities for management, we went into the Duluth Superior Area Community Foundation, and that took a lot more staff.

Kay: We had to have enough money to have the bodies there to follow up on those because that takes it takes a lot of care.

Shaun: How about challenges? You've listed the naysayers, that's a big challenge. You had to build the legal structure. You had to get money. You had to hire people. What other challenges were coming across the bow?

Kay: Well, you have successes and failures. You'd go a long time and not get what you expected or grow the way you expected, and then it would bloom. So it wasn't a straight line. You know, bumpy developmentally, but it was progressive. And I am incredibly proud of how the staff has sustained and fed this foundation over the years. I just think you've done a wonderful job.

Shaun: It's amazing when you look back and think for all those years of care.

Kay: And Holly (Sampson) was innovative in her programming and started new things that got noticed not only in Duluth, but statewide and nationally. And again, it's that credibility thing and it pays off. I think we are well received by whoever is in need of a home for their bequests or trusts, those who are making their mark on the communities.

Shaun: What are you most proud of? What comes to mind?

Kay: Well, I'm most proud of the growth and what you've been able to do in terms of the amount of support you've been able to give the community and the fine management of the scholarships for students. If there are any wrinkles in the fabric, I don't know where they are.

Shaun: So the Community Fund, that's a unique and powerful piece. Do you remember those early days and talking about that one little fund?

Kay: Well, it took some convincing because the pattern and the habit over generations was you had your passion and that's what you funded. And the problem was that the organization or interest that you had may not be sustainable over the years. Then you have all these little pockets of wealth that were no longer applicable to society. There was a good argument for starting something open-ended.

It seems to have worked and worked really well but you have to change the thinking of people with wealth to look broader.

Shaun: That fund has given away millions and millions and millions of dollars. When I walk around town and bump into nonprofit folk, I just kind of know in the back of my mind that this beautiful Foundation has been a part of the success of many. Sometimes a small part, sometimes a big part, lots of hands making the work, but involved at the right times and in the right spots.

Kay: Lots of times it just takes that floor, and an idea that will help a nonprofit bloom, that can provide service where it's really needed. And that changes from one decade to the next.

Shaun: It all goes back to November 3rd, 1983, when you guys started that little fund. It is still paying huge dividends going forward.

Kay: In the beginning, we thought if we could raise three million dollars, that would give us the floor we needed to continue to grow.

Shaun: You exceeded three million dollars!

Kay: Failure wasn't an option. You know, you get all these stubborn people.

Shaun: Where does that come from? They tell you how it can't be done, and you do it anyway?

Kay: Yes, that's right and that's kind of Duluth, too, don't you think? It can't be done. And we're going to do it anyway.

Shaun: Do you have hopes for the future of this thing? A vision writ large? What's the next 40 years look like?

Kay: Well, I don't know. At 90, I'm not going to worry about it. I have confidence that it will continue to grow and to be a tremendous asset to Duluth and be flexible. That's the key.