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Community Foundation
FOR SOUTH CENTRAL NEW YORK

COMMUNITY News

Group Constructs a HUB For Community Healing

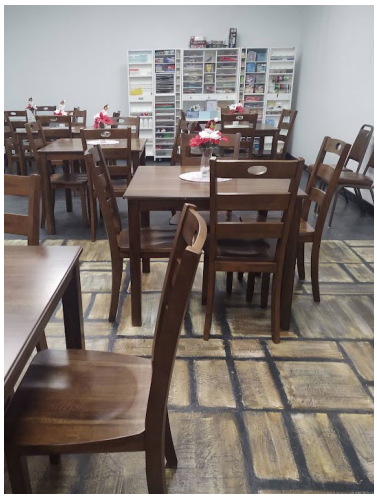
HEALING TAKES MANY forms. For more than 20 years, Afton-based Help After Loss (HALos) Inc. has offered counseling and referrals to help children, adults and families heal after various kinds of loss–perhaps the death of a loved one, or a divorce, incarceration, military deployment or debilitating injury.

Communities also suffer misfortunes that leave them grieving. Take the case of Afton, whose Great American supermarket closed about six years ago. "It was the loss of a grocery store, the loss of employment, the loss of money for the community," said Joyce Humphrey, founder and president of HALos and a certified grief recovery specialist. Transforming that business's abandoned shell into a center for healing fit perfectly with HALos' mission, she said. So HALos bought the building and started a multi-year project to create The HUB, a site designed to nurture Afton and surrounding communities in multiple ways.

Today, The HUB houses HALos' office, a therapeutic sensory room and a community room. The building also helps to bolster Afton's economy, providing commercial space to two local businesses.

It took a lot of contract and volunteer labor to turn the old grocery store into The HUB. "It was a mess," Humphrey said. Food had been rotting in coolers and on produce shelves for a year and a half. Patches made of wallboard and paneling masked a leak in the roof. "We tore down all the shelving, freezers and coolers and scrapped them, and the money we got from the scrap paid to get rid of all the Dumpster-loads of garbage," she said. The group also had the building thoroughly insulated.

A $33,000 grant from the Chobani Community Impact Fund, a Community Foundation Field of Interest fund, helped HALos turn part of the building into the space it now rents to Tommy's Custom Woodworks and Remodeling. "Tommy had an established business in Afton but didn't have the room he wanted," Humphrey said. "He has about doubled his space from what he had down the road and is doing really well. He's added two employees, and he has so many orders that last I knew, he said he is booked through September 2023."



A second commercial tenant–a deli–will soon open in The HUB as well.

Another grant from the Community Foundation helped HALos create its community room. The $5,000 paid for installing the floor and for equipment such as tables and chairs, a refrigerator and mats for yoga classes. HALos uses the space for its own activities, such as board meetings and its annual day camp for grieving children. The room also hosts events for the community, like the free blood pressure screening scheduled in February 2023. In the future, the Greater Afton Chamber of Commerce hopes to use the community room for training activities, Humphrey said.

The room could expand in the future, letting it accommodate even more events, as HALos renovates some still- undeveloped portions of The HUB. "And Tommy out back wants more space for his woodworking," Humphrey said.

To make The HUB more environmentally sustainable, HALos has signed up with a solar farm that provides electricity. "We'll be using solar electric at the building without having the upkeep of our own solar panels," Humphrey said. "We're looking at how do we protect our world, not just how do we help Afton."

Someone once asked Humphrey why she and HALos' supporters decided to shoulder all the work it took to create The HUB as a resource for Afton. "I didn't know how to answer him," she recalled. "And then I said, 'Why not? Somebody had to. So why not me?'"

Grant Funds Greenhouse For Nonprofit Farm

LONG WINTERS AND ERRATIC SPRINGS pose tough challenges for anyone who grows vegetables or flowers in our region. At Happy Compromise Farm & Sanctuary in Waverly, the growing season will have an easier start from now on, thanks to a new greenhouse purchased with a $5,000 grant from the Community Foundation.

Happy Compromise is a recent addition to New York's local agriculture scene. Co-founders Eryn Leavens and Oliver Gawlile originally started farming when they moved from California to Oregon in 2020. The plan was to raise food and flowers, based on vegan principles and environmentally-sustainable practices.

When they bought their property, the partners also took in the chickens, alpacas, ducks and geese that lived there, adding them to the animals that were already part of their household. "We went from 11 animals to about 40 overnight," Leavens said.

Forming a sanctuary wasn't part of the original plan. But as word of the farm spread through social media, many people contacted Leavens and Gawlile to ask if they would take in more animals. "Within the first month, it became apparent to us that the need for people to rescue animals was really big," Leavens said. To help meet that need, they formed a nonprofit organization, offering a permanent home to farmed and companion animals whose lives were otherwise in danger.

By the next year, though, Happy Compromise faced a danger of its own, ringed as it was by some of the many wildfires raging in Oregon at the time. "So we made a heartbreaking but responsible decision to move the entire organization, including 100 rescued animals, to upstate New York," Leavens said.

Despite its harsh winters, upstate New York is a "climate haven," Leavens said. Compared with many other regions, this one is free of wildfires, epic droughts, hurricanes, tornadoes and (at least for the past dozen years) disastrous floods. Tioga County offered land at an affordable price, and the area didn't already have many animal sanctuaries, she said. "It's also near Cornell, which is a great resource if you have a lot of animals."

Happy Compromise grew its first crops in 2022. The plan for 2023 is to grow "a ton of food and flowers" and operate a "take what you need, pay what you can food stand outside the front of the property," Leavens said. In a region where most farms focus strictly on dairy, there's little access to locally grown food, she explained. "We'd also love to donate to the food bank, if we have leftovers."

In the future, the farm might establish drop-off sites to help people who need food but can't get to the farm, Leavens said. "We would also like to sell to specialty restaurants."

Leavens and Gawlile are still adjusting their farming methods to the New York's climate. In 2022, they started all their seeds on the second floor of the farmhouse. That was fine until the time came to introduce their seedlings to the outdoors. "When we were hardening off plants, we had to walk up and down the stairs with trays 50 times a day, which is not a good setup and doesn't offer any room for growth," Leavens said.

The new 9 x 21-ft. greenhouse will simplify the job of starting seeds before the spring's last frost, and then extend the growing season further into the fall, increasing the benefits that Happy Compromise can offer to its neighbors, Leavens said.

Stretching Their Social Muscles

WHEN COVID-19 SENT STUDENTS HOME for months on end to attend school on line, it robbed them of a crucial element in their journey from childhood to adulthood–the chance to interact with other people. "We've been hearing from parents that their kids don't know how to socialize any more," said Shanel Boyce, a nurse, social worker and community organizer in Binghamton.

Boyce is co-founder, along with Salka Valerio, of Black Activist Women for Social Equity (BAWSE), a social justice group. The Community Foundation's Racial Justice and Equity Fund (RJEF) recently awarded BAWSE $10,000 to support a group that helps middle school and high school students in Binghamton get back on track with their social skills while developing healthy self esteem.

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>
> — SHANEL BOYCE, nurse, social worker and community organizer

Boyce and Valerio founded BAWSE to formalize the work they had been doing in the Binghamton community for more than a decade. The idea for the youth group grew from conversations in a Facebook group they moderate, called Mothers Of Color Helping Alliance (MOCHA).

"Preteens and teenagers who sat home for two years doing all their school work on the computer didn't have any opportunities to socialize in person," Boyce said. She, Valerio and members of MOCHA wanted to help kids start exercising those social muscles again. They also wanted to fill the needs of young people who don't fit the mold of what society in our region considers "normal," whether that's because they are people of color or they are part of the LGBTQ community.

Since November 2022, groups of anywhere from six to 15 kids have been assembling in Boyce's therapy office in downtown Binghamton for Saturday afternoon meetings that feature recreation, education and lunch, all free of charge. "It's very central and easy for them to get to," Boyce says. "And it's a homey environment, with couches, beanbag chairs and those kinds of things, which they enjoy." Some students take part just now and then; others attend every meeting. In total, the group has served about 40 kids.

Along with playing games and holding discussions, kids in the group have especially enjoyed taking part in formal debates. Boyce and Valerio had originally planned that as a single-session activity, but the students loved it so much, the group has kept the debates going. "Not only does this strengthen their ability to have cohesive arguments, but they are also working together, being part of a team," Boyce said. "And it helps to build their self confidence over all."

Self confidence and self esteem are important focuses for the group, since many young people need help in those areas. "Middle school and high school are not necessarily easy places to be," Boyce said. "We have conversations about difference and diversity, and what happens when you don't fit in. And what kinds of things you should not do in order to fit in."

Future plans for the group include trips to the movies and a roller rink.

Some parents say that this group is the only social activity their kids are willing to take part in these days, Boyce said. "They won't go to Girl Scouts. They won't go to after school activities. But they'll come to see us."

Why do those kids feel comfortable opening up to other people in Boyce's office? "Maybe it's the therapist in me," she said. "It's creating a space in which everyone feels seen and heard. You can be authentic. Everyone's a little bit different, and we embrace that as something that's valuable, versus something you have to hide."

Reception Marks Foundation's 25 Years

Binghamton's Kilmer Mansion offered a gracious setting for supporters and friends who gathered on October 19 to celebrate the Community Foundation's 25th anniversary.

"People loved the location," said Mandie Burns, the Foundation's development associate. "The ambience was wonderful."

While toasting the Foundation on its first quarter-century of engaged philanthropy, guests who were still emerging from the dreariness of COVID-19 restrictions also relished the chance to join a community event. "I heard from many people that it was so good to be out and seeing people," Burns said.

The evening's highlight came when the Foundation presented an unsolicited, unrestricted grant of $25,000 to the American Civic Association (ACA) in honor of our anniversary. The ACA provides a broad range of services to immigrants and refugees in our area, helping them integrate into the community. Several members of the ACA's staff and Board, were on hand to accept the check.

"They are some of the kindest, big-hearted people, with an amazing mission," Burns said, noting the mountains of work the ACA handles as it helps new arrivals with housing, employment, health care, legal assistance and English classes, among other services. "I was talking to one of the gentlemen, and he himself was working on more than 70 cases."

Guests at the party also enjoyed great food, provided by Red and White Catering of Chenango Bridge, favors from Somethin' Sweet Gourmet Chocolates of Johnson City, and music by pianist Richard Leoni, Burns said. "It was just an overall, amazing, exciting time."

Community Foundation
FOR SOUTH CENTRAL NEW YORK

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Farewell and Welcome!

Please join us in welcoming Karen Sastri and Abbey Ortu to the Community Foundation Board.

Abbey Ortu works for Tioga County Economic Development & Planning as a community development specialist. A native of Owego who attended Newark Valley Central Schools, she earned a bachelor's degree at SUNY Brockport and her master's degree at the University of Buffalo Abbey is a past executive director of the Discovery Center and the Tioga Arts Council. She lives in the Village of Newark Valley with her two teenagers and their menagerie of pets.

Karen Sastri is vice president, chief diversity officer at NBT Bank. She joined that company in 1996 and has extensive experience in training and development and employee relations. Karen earned a bachelor's degree from the University at Albany and holds a strategic Human Resources Business Partner certification (sHRBP). She is also very is active in the community, serving as a board member for the Chenango United Way and

Abbey Ortu

Karen Sastri

Dollars for Scholars, as well as a member of the Norwich Boys Soccer Boosters. She previously served on the Board of Directors for the United Way of New York State.

Both Karen and Abbey are long-time supporters of the Foundation as grants panelists.

As Karen and Abbey join the board, we bid a fond farewell to Jim Daniels and Jean Levenson, both nine-year veterans of service to the Foundation. Jim served as Board chair and Jean as vice chair. Both were very active on several Board committees, including Finance, Investment, Planning, Special Grant and Grants. Thanks to both for their commitment to the Foundation and their community. We will miss them!