It all started with what Mike Workman describes as “the most demoralizing thing that happened in my business life.” He had been president of a furniture manufacturing company employing 160 people in Morgan County, a rural community of 15,000. His company was owned by an investment-banking group that decided to sell all of its assets to a larger bank in Cincinnati.

“As it turned out, the regional bank was not interested in manufacturing, or any other assets of the purchase, except for the investment-banking group’s seat on the New York Stock Exchange,” he says. Workman’s company was liquidated. “I had no idea how painful rejection could be, and worse, how fearful my employees would be for their futures. I felt personally responsible for the loss of jobs and security in my community, and I was determined to do something about it.”

Workman scraped funds together, bought some of his previous employer’s equipment at auction, and struck out on his own. What started as a small shop where he and a few former employees made wooden stools has now become a robust and innovative furniture manufacturing cooperative creating work for 1,000 people across Appalachian Ohio. From Morgan County, Mike’s office-based team provides leadership, marketing, sales, and customer service. Clients are high-end hospitality design and purchasing firms seeking quality products made in America.

Inspired by Workman’s leadership, the directors of Morgan County’s community-improvement corporation approached Workman and asked him to take the helm. From this unpaid volunteer post, Workman successfully attracted a major manufacturer, creating even more jobs. Shortly after the plans were complete, Mike retired from the public post and returned to his own business of furniture manufacturing. At his departure, he was offered a $50,000 bonus for his work, but asked that the sum be set aside for a new community fund.

The power of partnership
This is where our paths crossed. At the Foundation for Appalachian Ohio, a regional community foundation spanning our state's neediest area, we serve as an incubator for county-focused foundations across our rural foothills. In the beginning, our primary challenge was to find local leaders—people who talk to anyone and everyone in their community, from the president of the bank to the laborer cranking lug nuts. One of the...
Cara Dingus Brook is president and CEO of the Foundation for Appalachian Ohio. We held a workshop on philanthropy for 50 community leaders; only six even knew we had started a community foundation.” But those leaders faithfully spread the word and gathered others to the cause, making the case to their community for organized philanthropy. Today, the Guernsey County Foundation has created more than 40 charitable funds, totaling $10 million in assets. FAO’s support, in the form of administrative assistance, investment services, fiduciary oversight, donor stewardship, and regional collaboration, provides the infrastructure to help this very localized philanthropy flourish. Ten counties have now developed their own community foundations under FAO’s umbrella—one of them Morgan County, at the instigation of Mike Workman. When he came to us with his initial funding, our first step was to make an announcement in the Morgan County Herald. After reading the article, two elderly residents contacted us to say they wanted to create a scholarship. Workman helped them develop the idea to create a multi-craft certification program. Scholarships to that program would open immediate job opportunities within the community so students could stay close to their roots.

It was not long before another unexpected gift arrived. Through a bequest, Hazel Syphers, age 100, left more than $300,000 with simple instructions: ensure no child in Morgan County goes without a wrapped present to open on Christmas. Understanding that the size of Hazel’s gift could provide such

earliest such leaders FAO encountered was Maribeth Wright, a certified public accountant who witnessed the generosity of her community’s citizens every day. It was expressed through quiet tithing to church and in the way clients opened their hearts and bank accounts when tragedy struck a neighbor. But when it came to major and planned gifts, most of Wright’s clients gave those gifts outside the county because there wasn’t a local community foundation to manage them.

Wright helped FAO prototype its first model of a local foundation for Guernsey County. “Whenever I could get my hands on an annual report of a similar community foundation, I would share it with prospective donors and supporters,” she recalls. “What we learned was that none of us in the community knew how to build endowment. We held a workshop on philanthropy for 50 community leaders; only six even knew we had started a community foundation.” But those leaders faithfully spread the word and gathered others to the cause, making the case to their community for organized philanthropy. Today, the Guernsey County Foundation has created more than 40 charitable funds, totaling $10 million in assets.

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presents into perpetuity, the Morgan Community Fund placed the bequest in endowment, and brainstormed ways to honor the donor’s intent while also achieving more strategic objectives. An idea emerged to make each gift a dual gift—younger children could feel the love of their community in the form of wrapped presents on Christmas morning, while older children could lead the gift-giving operation, developing a sense of belonging and purpose.

The program not only engages the next generation in giving, but it has attracted many more donations to MCF, as community members become inspired by the difference modest gifts—enough to buy a toy—can make. There’s one special donor I’ll call Mae. Well past retirement age, Mae still works as a janitor at a local bank. Her husband is a retired farmer and they have put three daughters through college, all of them high-school valedictorians. She sets aside $10 every year to deliver to MCF in person. “Each year she climbs three flights of stairs to deliver her gift, and then starts to cry at the good things we have done to help others,” says Workman. “Her caring for others shines like a bright beacon.”

From such donors of all sizes, ten years on MCF has built more than $1 million in assets and a robust network of involved community members. It supports an entrepreneurship program and business-plan contest for teens, a music program, a science and technology outreach program for elementary students, a youth summer arts program, personal-care kits for senior citizens, safety lights for the park, the Boy Scouts, fresh produce distribution from the farmer’s market, organ transplant seminars, stray animal spaying, and more.

MCF was also instrumental in bringing back a valued program that we had discontinued. When FAO began in 1998, a common barrier across Appalachian Ohio was that generations of distress had resulted in a culture of diminished expectations. We have sought to push back against this with initiatives such as an annual citizens award. This year’s award honored a teenager, Jordan Phillips, who at the age of 13 began a social enterprise with her sewing machine and raised $250,000 to fight cancer.

Hoping to inspire other such leaders, and as part of a public-awareness campaign to raise the sights of all our citizens, we launched a youth essay contest with generous sponsorship from an external funder. Thousands of students participated annually and it became a beloved tradition. When the funder switched priorities to supplying our food banks, we were grateful for help alleviating hunger—one in five families in our communities depend on such assistance—but it was difficult to see the contest go. We viewed the essay contest as the type of investment that would reduce our need for food pantries in the long run.

The Morgan Community Fund is bringing back and updating the writing contest to emphasize entrepreneurship, work ethic, educational pursuits, and philanthropy. Because it is something the community is choosing to fund for itself, it is on more sustainable footing going forward.

**Funneling big gifts to local causes**

Another of the foundations in our umbrella is also spearheading a literacy-related effort, concerned that children were returning to school after summer vacation having lost many of their gains in reading. “To give you an idea of how rural our community is, there is not even a place to buy a children’s book within the county,” notes Jim Rocchi of the Harrison County Community Foundation. With the knowledge that many children were living in homes without books, HCCF established an initiative to annually give a new book to every K-3 child in the county at the beginning of summer break.

Several other communities followed suit. FAO received a generous gift from American Electric Power to build a partnership between the region’s teachers and First Book, a national social enterprise that provides free and low-cost books to children in need. Starting this year, books will continuously be available to educators serving children across all ten local community foundations within the FAO umbrella.

FAO’s close, on-the-ground presence has attracted philanthropists who seek a “one-stop shop” for empowering local priorities and regional collaboration across numerous communities. When Gulfport Energy, a natural gas and oil company, began drilling within the region’s shale, it sought FAO’s help to ensure the community saw sustained benefit from the harvesting of its natural resources. Gulfport knew that many of the region’s citizens were now gaining new wealth in the form of leases and royalty payments, as well as burgeoning business opportunities. To help retain this wealth for community benefit, Gulfport invested in FAO’s work to build local foundations and established a grantmaking fund. Over the last four years, Gulfport has given more than 100 grants through FAO, reaching 47,000 people with educational, environmental, and health- and human–services opportunities.

One of the earliest of these grants funded an initiative in Guernsey County led by youth who sought to encourage resiliency and prevent self-harming behaviors among their peers. A couple years later, as FAO studied the best ways to help with one of our region’s greatest challenges—the alarmingly high rate of drug and alcohol disorders—it was clear that national research supported local intuition: peer-led efforts make for more effective prevention.

Building on the success of the Guernsey County pilot program, FAO secured a partnership with Ohio University to provide support for youth-led prevention initiatives across
ten communities, with individual strategies tailored to the specific circumstances of each one. Six months after this initiative launched, the Pfizer Foundation invested $500,000 to serve more youth across the region.

Pfizer and Gulfport chose to work within local philanthropic infrastructure so that their generous gifts would be used most effectively and in line with community priorities. Meanwhile, the participants in the program have expressed their appreciation at being part of a regional network. For many, it is the first time they have connected with someone “like them” who is trying to organize youth-led prevention efforts in an Appalachian community. As A. J. Stock, a pastor involved in the program, says, “We have shared challenges. We can plan and troubleshoot together, and support one another.”

If you build it, they will come One of the communities benefitting from this network is Perry County, which is positioned to participate in large part because of one man: Tom Johnson, founder and director of its own community foundation. As an investment banker, Johnson had lived all over the world—Singapore, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Switzerland, and London, to name a few. When the World Trade Center was attacked, he moved back home to Perry County to reconsider his priorities. He spent time with his parents, volunteered for town improvement projects, and became involved in restoring historic buildings. One thing led to another and he was elected mayor, a post he has held for the last ten years. In that role, he opened an emergency room in a county that didn’t have one, built a community-college partnership to create educational opportunities close to home, and more.

But his vision for the community did not begin and end with public funding. Like many others in our culture, charity was ingrained in Johnson from an early age. He shares how one Christmas morning, he and his sisters opened a set of walkie talkies. “As we were admiring all of our presents, my dad said, ‘Let’s go give part of our presents to the children of the supervisor of the lumber workers because they do not have very much.’” So Tom and his sisters took their new walkie talkies over to the other children and gave them away. While Tom’s family was not practicing organized philanthropy, “Even a ten-year-old boy was expected to give.” As is the hope for the children distributing Hazel Sypher’s Christmas presents, the lesson stayed with him to this day.

“One of the things that drives me is I am really aware of my sell-by date,” says Johnson. “My shelf life is finite. I have limited time to have an impact, and I am really passionate about trying to make a difference.” As Johnson updated his estate plan, he wanted to make provisions for local historic preservation—the interest that initially had led him into public life. His attorney recommended Johnson partner with his local community foundation to manage his planned gift. That was when Johnson “realized that we didn’t have what everyone else around us had—a vibrant community foundation.”

Without a source of organized local philanthropy, Perry County was lacking stimulus for nonprofit and social ventures—the kinds of activities that went beyond physical infrastructure to develop the social fabric and culture of community. Johnson recalled that when the Jobs and Family Services Department would issue requests for proposals, inviting nonprofits to lead activities there was public funding to accomplish, only one or two organizations were poised to respond. “Without a foundation, we didn’t have an ecosystem of nonprofit activity.” The lack of funding also stymied volunteer efforts, entrenching a culture of complacency.

Working with FAO, Johnson gathered a team of like-minded citizens to start the Community Foundation for Perry County. Even the small grants—typically $5,000—CFPC has awarded have sown the seeds for a nonprofit ecosystem. A local arts cooperative has been formed, a community garden started. Youth enjoy more arts and cultural experiences, and the county is benefitting from the substance-abuse prevention programming created through FAO’s network. There is an abundance of new energy and empowerment to make life better for others.

In talking with outside funders, Johnson has learned that they are now receiving many more innovative proposals from Perry County’s citizens. Many local business leaders have become key partners. One of the foundation’s first mini grants of $600 helped to facilitate this, funding a program that matches high-school students with small-business owners. The students spend a day shadowing their mentor on the job site and are then charged with creating a new marketing idea for the business. $5,000, $600, $10—these are tiny amounts of money in the absolute. In other contexts they could simply vanish into the background. But to us at FAO they represent something different: the potential of every member of our community, from child to senior citizen, to make an impact. And while the benefits are tangible, the sense of empowerment is equally important. Too often rural communities like ours are beset with complacency born of despair. A change in culture cannot occur until there is a change in behavior. And behavior change requires changing our core beliefs about ourselves and our potential. Every person who steps forward with time, energy, or treasure is living out the core beliefs we need to turn our communities around—and the results are here for all to see.