

# CELEBRATING LGBTQ+ PHILANTHROPY

BUILDING A MILWAUKEE FOR ALL  
TAKES ALL OF MILWAUKEE



"The lesbian community is pure philanthropy – we just don't have generational access to capital. Our philanthropy is blood, our philanthropy is work, our philanthropy is sweat."

## CAITLIN CULLEN

Food Center Director  
Kinship Community Food Center



"My wife and I base our philanthropy in trust. We give to the people facing an issue, trusting they will know best what to do with it."

## SARAH BERG

Greater Milwaukee Foundation Donor





# A MILWAUKEE FOR ALL NEEDS LGBTQ+ PERSPECTIVES AND PARTNERSHIPS

In collaboration with donors and community leaders across the region, the Greater Milwaukee Foundation is ushering in a fresh perspective on philanthropy – one in which all voices are valued and differences drive progress.

Gifts of time, talent, treasure and ties have upheld greater Milwaukee's LGBTQ+ community for generations, through adversity in numerous forms. In 1961, eight years before Stonewall, LGBTQ+ bar patrons bravely defended against a homophobic attack in an event known as the Black Nite Uprising. In the 1980s and '90s, philanthropic people and organizations, including the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, responded to the devastating HIV/AIDS crisis with funding, education and solidarity. Today, grassroots

and established organizations alike combat persistent disparities, particularly for transgender people and LGBTQ+ people of color.

Diverse in age, ethnicity, gender identity and sexual orientation, we celebrate the countless ways LGBTQ+ leaders regionwide enhance our community through generosity and advocacy. We depend on their perspectives to respond creatively to pressing needs, and we rely on their partnerships to open the door to aligned solutions. Ally participation is of the utmost importance – a thriving, inclusive community depends on each of us to contribute to that future.

**Our community is strongest in partnership. Join us as we build a Milwaukee for all.**



## LEADERSHIP SPOTLIGHT

# REIMAGINING LEGACY

### **RICARDO WYNN LIVES HIS LIFE FOR OTHERS – THOSE WHO CAME BEFORE HIM AND THOSE WHO WILL COME NEXT.**

Wynn's many hats include community engagement manager for Milwaukee County's Office of Equity, founder of the Empowering Community Action Initiative and prominent voice in Milwaukee's ballroom community, where members form chosen families called "houses" and compete in pageants, or "balls."

#### **How does history inform your perspectives on community?**

I often remind people that LGBTQ+ identity is not always Black. My queerness is an important part of who I am, but before I even choose how to love, I show up in the world as a Black person. And when we look at the history of Black identity in this country, we've often been denied the full opportunity to build legacy and claim our rightful place in systems of power and progress.

When I reflect on LGBTQ+ history, my mind goes to how Black and Brown voices were often left on the margins, expected to survive and find solutions on our own. If we don't confront and learn from that history, we miss the chance to understand what true progress requires. To move forward, we must first be honest about where we've been.

#### **How has chosen family been meaningful for you?**

Statistics show that people who look like me – Black, queer men – often don't make it out of high school. But being surrounded by a chosen family, in spaces where Black

gay men were thriving and successful, gave me a new vision for what my life could be. It allowed me to reimagine my future beyond what the statistics predicted.

Many people like me leave Milwaukee in search of opportunity, driven out by systemic barriers and persistent challenges. But I made it my legacy to stay, to plant roots and be part of the change. My chosen family gave me the strength to weather the storm and continue pushing forward.

#### **What place does philanthropy have in Milwaukee's growth?**

Philanthropy offers people the chance to reimagine what's possible, to do something different and create lasting impact. Without the support of philanthropy and private donors, I wouldn't have been able to make my mark as a leader within the house and ballroom community.

Young people come to ballroom spaces to vogue, to celebrate their identity, to be unapologetically themselves, but they also come seeking community and belonging. Many need essentials like food, hygiene

supplies, emotional safety. Philanthropy makes it possible to meet everyday needs while empowering leaders like me to design innovative, culturally rooted programming that connects, uplifts and heals.

### **What misconceptions do people have about philanthropy?**

For many years, philanthropy failed to reflect the voices and leadership of Black and Brown communities at the grassroots level. This led to a misconception that we weren't worthy of funding or didn't belong at decision-making tables. There was also a lack of visibility of people like us being recognized as philanthropic leaders or donors.

I tell people about my Greater Milwaukee Foundation funding to show them that philanthropy isn't reserved for the elite – it's about access to opportunity and knowing

how to navigate and leverage opportunities to create change. This includes trust-based philanthropy, which is essential for effectively supporting community-led efforts.

### **What do you see as your role going forward?**

At this stage, my goal is to lead, guide and support others. I find myself in a coaching role, both in professional spaces and within ballroom culture. I'm mentoring emerging leaders, helping them host balls, reviewing proposals and offering the kind of guidance that was once given to me.

There's real joy in being able to represent and speak on behalf of my community. I take pride in showing up as my full self, sharing my experiences holistically and using my voice to inspire progress and create meaningful change.



The Milwaukee Chapter of Mizrahi, Wynn's ballroom house.



**"If we want to see a better tomorrow, we have to pour into our community today.** For my legacy, it's been about showing up and committing to the labor of love that real change requires."

#### **RICARDO WYNN**

Community Engagement Manager  
Milwaukee County Office of Equity

## FEATURE

# PHILANTHROPY WITH STAYING POWER

## CHARLIE NASH IS SHAPING THE NEXT CHAPTER OF ONE OF THE OLDEST LGBTQ+ FOUNDATIONS IN THE COUNTRY

Long before Charlie Nash joined Cream City Foundation as board chair and president, a strong moral compass gave him direction.

“My mother would tell you I’ve always been the one to say, ‘That’s not fair!’” he said. “I probably have an overdeveloped sense of justice and empathy – I’m often more motivated by the emotions and impact of other people than myself.”

Nash’s first professional venture into social issues was through an employee resource group (ERG) at a former employer, where he did LGBTQ+ advocacy. As he gained professional experience and capacity to give, he sought out additional volunteer opportunities. His first board experience was with the adoption agency he and his husband used, and then in 2021, a seat opened on the board of Cream City Foundation. It was a natural fit.

“I’m the kind of person that, when I get involved, I really get involved,” he said. “I was very quickly committed and wanted to see the organization thrive.”

Drawing from his experience with ERGs, Nash helped the foundation navigate business networks to secure corporate support and event sponsorships. In early

2023, he stepped into his current role, leading Cream City Foundation through a period of transformation.

In the years since Nash started his tenure, Cream City Foundation moved to a fully volunteer board and wound down a fiscal sponsorship program to refocus on direct and sustainable community impact, executed in three primary forms.

First, there’s grantmaking. Cream City Foundation and its donors have provided over \$1.6 million in grants since its founding in 1982, supporting local nonprofits such as Diverse & Resilient, Holton Street Clinic, Milwaukee LGBT Community Center and Pathfinders. Nash sees the model as a way to lean into grassroots, creative efforts while maintaining support for established organizations.

Second, scholarships. The foundation has awarded \$270,000 in scholarships since 2017, a hallmark of its community offerings and part of a commitment to build equity and prosperity in the LGBTQ+ community while investing in future leaders through education.

Finally, convening. Nash says convening isn’t simply hosting events – it’s finding ways to bring the community together



around critical funding opportunities. With an intentional approach to partnership, Cream City Foundation has seen increased coalition building across a community with diverse experiences, perspectives and needs. It also has welcomed growth in partnerships outside of the LGBTQ+ community with allies and partner organizations.

In 2024, Cream City Foundation joined the Greater Milwaukee Foundation family as a partner foundation, maintaining independent decision-making power with a supporting organization structure while turning to the Foundation for investment expertise, administrative support and regional reach.

"We're excited for the partnership with the Greater Milwaukee Foundation to amplify our voice and needs outside of our own echo chamber," he said. "And on the opposite end, Cream City Foundation can be a source of

information on LGBTQ+ community needs and fill in some gaps in philanthropy."

Looking forward, Nash and Cream City Foundation hope to tap into expanded networks to forge partnerships with allies across the region. Many LGBTQ+ community members – especially transgender people and people of color – continue to face stark disparities, and Nash hopes a response will continue to build from donors of all backgrounds.

With growing partnerships and continued stewardship of resources, he sees a bright future.

"I'm hopeful that this is the start of the next era, the next generation of our mission," Nash said. "I look at the first 40 years of our organization, and I see this as the start of the next 40 years. Or until this work is no longer needed."

"I feel a large sense of responsibility to those who came before us, **investing time and energy and sacrificing safety to do this work.**"

## CHARLIE NASH

Board Chair and President  
Cream City Foundation



Donor Karen Valentine (left) and Charlie Nash

## WE GIVE OUR TIME



From her hometown of Minneapolis to her current Milwaukee network, **Laura Mayerle** has found something consistent across LGBTQ+ communities: a culture of love and kindness.

"There's this compassion and level of understanding that's almost an unspoken rule," she said. "You could ask anybody in the queer space and they will have the same feeling. It's really special."

It's a feeling that inspired Mayerle to volunteer her time with nonprofits, including as vice-chair of the **Cream City Foundation** board. She's been excited to see increased engagement across generations, gender identities and cultural communities, and she hopes partnership with the Greater Milwaukee Foundation continues to expand philanthropy in all its forms.

"Monetary giving is just one piece of the puzzle," Mayerle said. "If you're able to give a piece of your day to make a difference in someone else's life – to you it may be small, but to someone else, you're making their day."

## WE GIVE OUR TALENT



**Caitlin Cullen** is known as a chef, but her passion is people.

"My goal is to cook young people into being," she said. "My only specialty is telling people they matter, even when the rest of the world says they don't."

Cullen feels fortunate to have been given every opportunity to thrive, from classrooms to kitchens, and her career choices have always been motivated by leveling the scales for others. That includes joining **Kinship Community Food Center**, where she champions food access and workforce development for disinvested communities. To her, that's queer philanthropy: a loving, creative approach to social needs with a willingness to take risks on new people and new approaches. Thinking queerly, she calls it.

"Queer philanthropy doesn't look like everyone else's philanthropy, because nothing we do looks like everyone else's thing," Cullen said. "But giving to continually fill up people's wells, whether fiscally or emotionally, is the whole point."



# PHILANTHROPISTS

## WE GIVE OUR TREASURE AND TIES



**Jim Schleif and Bill Morley's** relationship and eventual partnership with the Greater Milwaukee Foundation were born during dark times, fighting for the dignity, care and rights of people with HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and '90s. In 1989, Schleif, now a Foundation Board member, was diagnosed with the disease, leading him to the Milwaukee AIDS Project and much-needed support and community.

"At MAP, I found hope, life, light, incredible friendships and life's best gift, my life partner, Bill, in 1992," Schleif said. "In a strange way, through tragedy, the HIV/AIDS crisis advanced the visibility and humanity of the LGBTQ+ community while galvanizing us. It gave us a power we didn't know we could muster. We marched. We cried. We loved. We prevailed."

It was during this time of terrible grief and fierce bonds that they became aware of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, which was supporting people with AIDS by funding social, medical, prevention and advocacy services.

"Unapologetically, the Greater Milwaukee Foundation Board and staff boldly stepped in without judgement where others were afraid to go. Bill and I will never forget this bravery," Schleif said. "Nearly forty years later, we are passionate fund holders, continuing our affinity to this trailblazing entity which to this day stands up and shows up every day for those without a voice."

The focuses of the **James A. Schleif and William H. Morley Charitable Fund** have shifted alongside community needs. What hasn't changed is the couple's resilient and passionate commitment to locking arms with allies to stand up for the rights and values they hold close.

"The Foundation continues to lift up ALL Milwaukee voices and celebrates indestructible friendships with courage," said Schleif. "LGBTQ+ people are known as a giving community. Our philanthropy and volunteerism have made us stronger while we inspire and safeguard our future generations. And that is something to be immensely proud of."

# JOIN US

## TIME

- **Engage in the Greater Milwaukee Foundation's stakeholder opportunities**, including visioning sessions, tours and events
- **Consider joining the Foundation's Community Adviser & Ambassador Network (CAAN)**, comprised of leaders and professional advisers with diverse backgrounds and a passion for philanthropy and service

## TALENT

- **Volunteer with a nonprofit** by joining a board, serving on a committee or sharing your expertise
- **Provide pro bono consulting services** to a nonprofit of interest

## TREASURE

- **Start or grow a fund** at the Foundation
- **Create a legacy gift** through the Foundation to ensure an impact
- **Coinvest in our strategic priorities** to advance community outcomes including economic mobility, educational opportunity, health equity and housing security

## TIES

- **Introduce members of your network** to the Foundation
- **Refer a community leader or professional adviser** to join CAAN

The Greater Milwaukee Foundation is YOUR community foundation, and charitable partnership is YOUR chance to share your unique gifts in this collaborative work. **In partnership, we can move greater Milwaukee forward together.**



An anonymous Greater Milwaukee Foundation donor gave \$1.2 million to support Light the Hoan. Photo by Kristine Hinrichs.





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