

The Story of the Pickaway County Community Foundation as Told by Shirley Bowser

By Amy Lake
Community Policy Analysis Center
University of Missouri-Columbia
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As 75 year old Shirley Bowser tells the story, the Pickaway County Community Foundation started with a pile of pamphlets on a ping pong table in Doris Yamarick's basement. "You know," Ms. Yamarick said to her friend, Ms. Bowser, one day when they were having lunch together in a restaurant in Circleville, Ohio, "My ping pong table is covered in pamphlets. We are going to have to do something with them or I'm throwing them out."

Ms. Bowser knew exactly what her friend was talking about. For the past 20 years, Ms. Bowser had been learning about community foundations from the meetings she attended as a Board member of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. She brought home pamphlets from the meetings and shared them with her friend, Ms. Yamarick. Ms. Bowser had seen the good that community foundations could bring to small rural areas.

Community foundations are a fast growing strategy for community development in rural America.

Through community foundations, communities can endow funds to support local initiatives from economic development to the arts to college scholarships. At the same time, community foundations provide people with a way to support

their own communities through charitable giving and ensure that communities have a reliable internally generated asset to draw upon.

Ms. Bowser was convinced it would be good for her home of Pickaway County, Ohio, too. That day in the restaurant, Ms. Yamarick told Ms. Bowser there was still one thing that worried her. "I'm afraid that we are going to go through the process of starting this thing and then we won't be able to find donors."

Ms. Bowser looked slowly around the restaurant. "Doris," she said, "I can count five people in here who could write checks for \$5,000 right now." Ms. Yamarick did not respond immediately. When she did, she said, "I count six."

Pickaway County, Ohio, with a population of 54,700 people, is nestled between Columbus to the north and the Appalachian Mountains to the south. As Ms. Bowser describes it, Pickaway is a transition county



Members of the Pickaway County Community Foundation Board and the Pickaway Competitive Network:

Front row (left to right): Dan Fouts, Suzanne Welker, Marie Gerhardt, Shirley Bowser, Marcia Hall, John Torres and Mike Estadt

Second row: Amy Elsea, Dr. Sereana Dresbach, Jean Droste, Chuck Wellman, Marge Wolford, Marsha Waidelich and Rodger Southward.

between urban and rural, Appalachian Ohio—a microcosm of central Ohio geographies, cultures, and economies. The northern part of the county is suburban in look and feel and home to many Columbus area commuters. The south is much more hilly and rural, rich with Appalachian culture.

Unlike many counties that are considered “pass throughs” from urban to rural, Pickaway has a strong identity of its own. Circleville, with a population of 13,700, is the county seat and the hub of economic activity for central Pickaway. The county, according to Ms. Bowser, had a strong industry with companies like GE, RCA, DuPont, Pittsburgh Plate and Glass, Container Corporation, and canning factories until quite recently. Pickaway is easily accessible by highways, has a good workforce, and natural resources like the underground aquifer, so it was always attractive to industry. Nonetheless, Pickaway lost much of its manufacturing base in the early 2000s, when several of the larger businesses closed or downsized. Pickaway County still has a strong agricultural identity, with alluvial soil that is ideal for farming. Many of the small family farms in the area have given way to larger corporate family farms and housing developments. Ms. Bowser’s family has been farming in southern Ohio for seven generations, and she is married to a farmer. So, the future of agriculture is a particular passion for her.

After rallying local support with Ms. Yamarick’s help, Ms. Bowser was able to help Pickaway County get \$35,000 in seed money through the Kellogg Foundation to start the Pickaway County Community Foundation in 2001. Some of the seed money was used to hire a lawyer and develop the bylaws. Mike Harrison, a local retired businessman, was recruited to act as the first Treasurer, and Ms. Bowser was the first President. They were very deliberate about the structure of the Foundation and the Board. They could not afford to hire a full-time executive director. Instead, they developed an affiliation with Columbus Foundation, which was much larger and already had infrastructure and an experienced staff in place. The Columbus Foundation manages Pickaway County Community Foundation’s funds and handles all of its investments. The larger foundation has assigned a staff person as the liaison to the Pickaway County Community Foundation. This arrangement keeps the overhead costs for Pickaway low and allows them to operate with a volunteer Board and officers. The Foundation intentionally recruited Board members that would represent the diversity of the county, in terms of geography, profession, age, and expertise. They have set term limits to 2 years for officers and 10 years for Board members, in recognition that fresh ideas and change are of utmost importance. Now that the Foundation has grown to 50 funds and \$3.6 million, they have developed one paid position for the Assistant Treasurer.

Ms. Bowser is thankful but realistic about the importance of the original seed money from Kellogg. “It gave us the spark to get started, but we’ve done it all ourselves. It’s not the money, but what you do with it, that matters.”

In 2001, residents of Pickaway County, Ohio used \$35,000 in seed money from the Kellogg Foundation to start the Pickaway County Community Foundation.

Now, in 2010, the Pickaway County Community Foundation has \$3.6 million and 50 funds.

The Foundation has done a great deal in the past 10 years. It donated \$10,000 to each of the four schools in the county to develop their own school funds, which are held by the Foundation. It has an active Youth Advisory Council (YAC) made of 15 Pickaway County youths. The YAC raises its own money and makes its own grants to support local projects. The Foundation has provided financial support for the Circleville City swimming pool and gives scholarships to youth across the county to use the pool. The Foundation has also set up several scholarship funds to help young people go to college.

One of their most visible projects has been the conversion of 72 acres owned by the City of Circleville into the Mary Virginia Crites Hannan Park, which is fully accessible to both children and adults with disabilities. Boundless playgrounds are outfitted with handicap accessible play equipment, and all the trails are blacktopped. The park has fully accessible wetlands and bird watching stations. And, there is ice skating in the winter. This effort was spearheaded by Ralph Starkey (1931-2010), a former New Giants football player and native of Pickaway County, who recently passed away. Mr. Starkey tirelessly organized volunteers and assisted in fundraising. The community, with the support of the Pickaway County Community Foundation, raised \$1.8 million for this project. While the bulk of the donations came from local sources, there were key outside funders as well. Pickaway competed for and received a matching grant through the Access to Recreation program, which was sponsored by the Council of Michigan Foundations. This was supplemented by funding from the State of Ohio.

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Ms. Bowser appreciates the concrete accomplishments of the Foundation, but she sees beyond them to the more intangible rewards, too. She says that the Foundation and its activities have “brought people together to discuss issues that are hard to discuss,” which can be challenging in a county as diverse as Pickaway. Additionally, it has “given donors the opportunity to support something they are passionate about” locally in Pickaway County. The concept of Memorial gifts to the Foundation has become very appealing for people who love and value their hometown and want a way to give back.

It is clear that Ms. Bowser is practical and articulate about Pickaway County. Still, she knows the value of a good dream when she sees it, and the Foundation has stirred up many of them. “This has given us dreams of what the future should look like,” she says.

She believes that the residents of Pickaway County should be in control of their future and that it takes investment, leadership, and planning to make that happen. “I don’t know where we are going,” she says, “but we need to raise enough money to build enough leadership to make deliberate decisions.”

Ms. Bowser also believes in the concept of the “servant-leader” and has spent a lifetime in leadership and volunteer roles locally and at the state level. “My role,” says Ms. Bowser of her volunteer efforts with the Foundation “is to connect the dots between people with dreams and people who can help materialize those dreams.”

Ms. Bowser sees youth and change as integral to good community leadership, so she is interested in opening career paths for young families. “I’m 75 years old,” she says, “and one of the things I’ve learned is that leadership is ongoing. You never really arrive there because there is always a new generation.”

“I graduated from high school in 1953. Most of my high school class got jobs, bought houses and sent their kids to college.” This is not just idle reminiscing, but rather a statement on the history of the local economy and job choice. Young working people don’t have the same range of employment choices in Pickaway as they did in the past.

“These 30 – 42 year olds are awesome,” she says. But, they need reasons to stay in Pickaway and take over the reins of leadership. “I have two grandchildren at Ohio State University who would love to come back, but there are no jobs.”

In 2006, the Pickaway County Community Foundation sponsored a trip for twelve Pickaway County residents to visit Nebraska to learn about some of the groundbreaking work rural communities were doing with economic development and community foundations. Half of the group was from the Foundation Board, the other half was citizens at large. “It was really a bonding experience,” says Ms. Bowser, “we came back all enthused.”

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This enthusiasm sparked a new round of planning and visioning for the Foundation and the community. With technical assistance from the Aspen Institute and from the RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship and broad participation from across the county, the community identified three new priorities (Fields of Interest): Education, Leadership, and Agriculture. The Foundation established the Pickaway Competitiveness Network based on these three priorities and recently secured \$50,000 in start-up funding for each of the three Fields of Interest. In April 2010, the Foundation and the Pickaway Competitiveness Network announced the launch of Field of Interest Challenge Grants along with the leadership teams for each committee. Each Field of Interest committee has been challenged to raise \$25,000 by March 31, 2011 with a promise of a \$25,000 match from the Pickaway County Community Foundation if they are successful.

Ms. Bowser is retiring from the Foundation Board this year after 10 years of service. Several others are retiring with her. She is not maudlin about this change but rather excited about what might come next in Pickaway with a new set of leaders. What does she see in the future? “I have big dreams,” says Ms. Bowser. “I hope to live to see the Foundation get to \$50 million.” She pauses. “Or \$100 million.”

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... Pickaway County Community Foundation, go to <http://www.thepccf.org/>