




THESE WOMEN on A MISSION LED THE NONPROFIT SECTOR WITH RESILIENCE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

More than a year of crisis has created untold need in New Hampshire. The state's nonprofits — many of them women-led — stepped in to help meet that need, all the while having to navigate the immense obstacles the pandemic posed. Here we spotlight the weighty and wondrous work of some of those women and their organizations. 

By Barbara Coles



When the pandemic shut down Red River Theatres in Concord, Executive Director Angie Lane says she and her staff, then reduced by more than half, began “preparing for the worst and working like hell to make sure that didn’t happen.” They knew how important River River Theatres, or RRT, was to the community as a cultural touchstone. There’s nothing else like it in New Hampshire.

movie theater,” Lane says. “We are a community space, where people engage and connect to each other and the world through film.” Important discussions about issues like the environment, social justice and mental health are generated by the films.

Being shut down for 15 months meant a huge loss of revenue. Like many other nonprofits, it stayed afloat thanks to ongoing donations and state and federal programs designed to support nonprofits during the pandemic.

RRT's big screen came to life again in July. "Unlike other industries," Lane says, "the in-person experience is the experience, so we're happy to welcome people back." ❤️

Phoebe Bray of The Community Kitchen

For almost 40 years, The Community Kitchen has provided healthy hot meals and take-home food boxes to the low-income men, women and families with children in the Monadnock Region. When the pandemic struck, Executive Director Phoebe Bray says closing their doors was never considered: "People living on a low income are the fastest and hardest hit in any crisis. Very few of our clients have savings to fall back on."

Bray says she and her staff turned the in-person meals, served weekdays and on Sunday, into a take-out service "almost overnight," scrambling to find enough containers. Their pantry program changed incrementally — first by limiting the number of people being served, but then creating a drive-through pantry.

In the beginning, for both programs, food supply was an issue. "Our suppliers were having the same supply difficulties that supermarkets were experiencing," Bray says. "It calmed down, but the first few months were very worrying."

Going forward, Bray says the drive-through pantry service — now valued by clients with children, mobility issues or a lack of time — is likely to continue. The dining room will reopen. What Bray calls "the silver lining" of the past year is a closer relationship with their clients. ♥



PHOTO BY JARED CHARNEY



COURTESY PHOTO MICHAEL MOORE, KEENE SENTINEL

Marianne Jackson of Gibson Center for Senior Services

Enriching the lives of seniors and fostering connection, joy and purpose — that's the mission of the Gibson Center in North Conway. This past year made accomplishing that mission difficult. The Center was required to close, cutting off the area's elder population from its many programs, among them exercise classes, social events and bus trips. The congregate dining that served thousands of meals shut down. The wheelchair-accessible buses that took people on errands came to a stop.

"The pandemic was severe on the elder population," Executive Director Marianne Jackson says. "Besides the real fear of the disease, many felt abandoned." To ease the isolation, the Center provided seniors with free computers along with training and advice about broadband connection. Also easing isolation, the Center's staff reached out to people with more than 5,000 phone calls.

Plus, all of the people receiving Meals on Wheels continued to receive them. "It required onsite work in the kitchen with half the staff," Jackson says. "I was proud of how everyone pitched in to make it happen."

One of the innovations of the past year that will continue and grow: computer/internet literacy programs. "We're excited to move forward," Jackson says. ♥



Katherine Kolios of Rain for the Sahel and Sahara

How the pandemic is experienced and responded to is not universal. As Katherine Kolios, executive director of Rain for the Sahel and Sahara, points out, some parts of the world don't have enough hospitals, doctors or equipment to support communities in normal times, much less during a pandemic.

The Portsmouth-based Rain partners with rural and nomadic communi-



ties in Niger to build resilience through access to education and economic opportunity. Last year, the country's resilience was quickly tested as the pandemic hit. Kolios says, "As travel was prohibited and supply chains were impacted, prices in Niger skyrocketed. If food and water weren't available locally, they simply weren't available." There were warnings of famines of biblical proportions.

Rain went to work establishing hand-washing stations, drilling wells, creating market gardens, distributing masks, and providing communitywide health and hygiene training. They also worked, successfully, to keep girls from dropping out of school because of the prolonged closures.

"Niger can feel very far away, especially when our home communities are suffering and our natural inclination is to focus inward," Kolios says. "But, as this pandemic reminds us, we live in an interconnected world." ♥

Marty Sink of CASA

In its statewide work advocating for abused and neglected children, CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) of New Hampshire does just about everything face to face. "Every aspect of CASA's work is relational, and face to face is critical," says Marcia "Marty" Sink, CASA's president/CEO. "Because of that, the pandemic posed major challenges, and we had to adapt very, very quickly."

The urgency came from statutory mandates that require certain timelines for court cases that involve abused and neglected children. "Delayed permanency can be so devastating, whether that's reunification with the child's biological family or adoption," Sink says. "The courts recognized the need to carry forward with these cases."

To accommodate that need, judges held hearings telephonically. That meant Sink and her staff had to ensure that the volunteer advocates who deal directly with the children had the capacity to participate in the hearings. "We also had to work on how advocates could maintain a presence in the lives of the children they were advocating for," Sink says.

Recruitment and training were also a challenge. Instead of in-person recruitment presentations, CASA created virtual presentations. The mandatory pre-service training, normally done in classrooms, also went virtual. Sink says that turned out to be a benefit: "People from all over the state can train at the same time. It's been incredibly effective and efficient."

Sink says the past year has been grueling, but CASA met the challenge: "The kids needed to know that we weren't abandoning them or stepping away because of the pandemic." ♥





PHOTO BY JARED CHARNEY

Eileen Groll Liponis of the New Hampshire Food Bank

A food bank with a rapidly diminishing inventory. That’s how it was for the New Hampshire Food Bank when the pandemic suddenly and simultaneously increased demand and reduced supplies. “It flipped our model upside down,” says Executive Director Eileen Groll Liponis.

Because of the demand, grocery stores, the primary donors to the Food Bank, had nothing left to donate. And there were no food drives. That meant the Food Bank had to buy the food. “We purchased more food in March of 2020 than we did in all of 2019,” Liponis says. Thanks to the generous financial support they received, they were able to keep up with demand.

The Food Bank distributes food to more than 400 partner agencies around the state, with the goal, as Liponis says, “to

feed the hunger and nourish the health of New Hampshire’s food insecure.” Among other things, they also have programs that teach nutrition and a culinary job training program that produces more than 700 meals a day for feeding programs throughout the state.

The biggest challenge — replacing volunteers who distributed food. Liponis says, from April to August of 2020, the New Hampshire National Guard stepped in to help. That worked so well, the Food Bank will continue to use the Guard’s model for mobile food pantries.

Despite the challenges, Liponis says, it was imperative the Food Bank’s services continued: “New Hampshire was depending on us. We had to stay strong to feed those in need.” ❤️



PHOTO BY ALLEGRA BOVERMAN

Lyn Schollett of NH Coalition Against Domestic & Sexual Violence

When stay-at-home orders were issued as the pandemic began to take hold, it had a profound impact on survivors of domestic and sexual abuse. “They were trapped at home with their abusers and increasingly isolated from services and people who could help them,” says Lyn Schollett, executive director of the Concord-based NH Coalition Against Domestic & Sexual Violence.

With a mission to create safe and just communities through advocacy, prevention and empowerment of anyone affected by domestic violence and sexual assault, as well as stalking and human trafficking, Schollett says the Coalition launched a statewide media campaign to

reach survivors and worked collaboratively with their 12 crisis centers to quickly implement new online chat, text and video services. They also worked with courts to allow victims to file for restraining orders online and to make sure there was enough funding to place survivors fleeing abuse in hotels when shelters were full.

Schollett says the pandemic worsened stresses that victims already face — among them, economic hardship, the absence of school and childcare, and extreme isolation. “Through it all,” she says, “crisis center advocates continued to be innovative, scrappy, and completely focused on the well-being and safety of victims.” ♥



Pam Sullivan of WREN

Dedicated to supporting better lives and livelihoods in the North Country, the Women’s Rural Entrepreneurial Network, known as WREN, provides marketplace access and technical assistance to both emerging and established artists. That access, says Executive Director Pam Sullivan, provides “a visual presence and economic living in the region while also providing cultural engagement for residents and visitors.”

In March of 2020, WREN was scheduled to change all of its programming to in-person at its Bethlehem location. With the pandemic gaining strength, Sullivan, only two months into the job, had to quickly pivot. “We transitioned to the Zoom platform,” she says. “We also changed and modified our curriculum to serve the new needs of our participants.”

When the Gallery at WREN and the Local Works Marketplace were shut down by the pandemic, an online store was set up for members. Sullivan and her staff used the downtime to update the gallery and marketplace to make them into what Sullivan calls a must-go-to destination in the North Country. “It’s clear,” she says, “that WREN is now needed more than ever.” ♥

PHOTO BY RICK BROUSSARD



PHOTO BY KENDAL J. BUSH

Sharron McCarthy of Girls Inc.

We are a second home to our girls, their safe place — they rely on us," says Sharron McCarthy, CEO of Girls Inc. "We feel a huge responsibility for their welfare."

When the Girls Inc. centers in Manchester and Nashua were closed down by the pandemic, McCarthy says she and her staff were determined to find solutions that allowed the girls to continue to thrive and for their care-takers to go to work with peace of mind.

At the centers, there are numerous programs for girls ages 5 to 18 — including financial and media literacy, STEM, wellness, leadership and fitness — that are designed to inspire all girls to learn to be "be strong, smart and bold" in a safe, encouraging, uplifting environment. That way, McCarthy says, "they can realize their full potential and see beyond their existing circumstances."

Among the actions taken, with schools and the Girls Inc. programs shut down, a full-day "Smart Café" was opened to provide supervised remote learning. Chromebooks were provided, if needed. "This was the perfect solution for many of the families we serve, many of which are single parents or grandparents," McCarthy says.

Once schools reopened, the regular Girls Inc. after-school programming resumed, its safety enhanced by a new air purification system. Other programs are up and running as well. Key to continuing on was assistance from the federal CARES Act and funding from local foundations.

"This pandemic took a toll on kids," McCarthy says, "and it will take a while to fully recover and get to 'normal.'" But, she adds, "Knowing we were able to be successful during a time like this reminds us of what we are capable of accomplishing." ♥

Annette Escalante of Farnum

For people recovering from addiction to alcohol and other drugs, the pandemic created many more stresses than they were already facing. "Isolation especially is not optimal," says Annette Escalante, senior vice president of Farnum, an Easterseals NH alcohol and drug treatment facility. The isolation of working from home, the lack of physical interaction because of social distancing, job loss or reduction in hours, the fear of the unknown — all, Escalante says, contributed to a rise in substance misuse.

Like other treatment providers in the state, Farnum was already dealing with a considerable increase in opioid use and overdoses. The pandemic required Farnum to quickly change all aspects of its work in order to continue delivering services, and to do so safely. Among the changes, the number of beds for residential treatment was reduced. Those in treatment were no longer allowed in-person visits; families stayed connected by Zoom. Telehealth technology was used for meetings with staff.

"The Farnum mission is to help adults reclaim their lives from addiction," Escalante says. "No one should ever feel they have no hope of achieving recovery — even during a global pandemic." ♥



COURTESY PHOTO



PHOTO BY JARED CHARNEY

Tina Sawtelle of The Music Hall

The Music Hall has survived much in its 140-plus years, and it will survive another 140,” says its executive director, Tina Sawtelle. But this past year was one for the books; it presented Sawtelle and her staff with historic challenges. “It was truly an unprecedented time, with a period of forced closure and then tremendous uncertainty about how best to safely operate.”

When the Portsmouth-based Music Hall — its theater, music, dance, opera, cinema, literary discussions and other performing arts — fell silent, revenue dropped more than 90%. Finally, finding a way to safely operate, the decision

was made to reopen. “We felt strongly that, for the Music Hall to successfully come out of the pandemic without having to rebuild from the ground level, it was key to keep our constituency of patrons and supporters visiting our theater.”

Still, there were challenges, Sawtelle says: “Maintaining audience confidence, staff reductions, unrelenting and constantly changing ground conditions, keeping the existing staff healthy, and avoiding complete burnout.”

It was all for the cause. As Sawtelle says, “We believe that art binds us together for greater understanding of human experiences, and is a critical element of wellness.” ❤️

Toni DeGennaro of the New Hampshire Philharmonic

First taking the stage way back in 1895, the New Hampshire Philharmonic has confronted the challenges of a pandemic twice, in 1918 and now. Through it all, its mission has been to connect people to the power of classical music through compelling concerts, engaging programs and educational outreach.

Composed of more than 60 professional, amateur and student musicians from across the state, the orchestra, known as The Phil, is what Executive Director Toni DeGennaro calls "a living laboratory." But that came to a sudden stop when the 2020 season was canceled.

Like many nonprofits, The Phil found its revenue stream quickly drying up. No ticket sales, diminishing grants, reduced charitable giving. Despite that, DeGennaro says, "we pulled off two livestream concerts during the pandemic, and it felt amazing." One of the concerts was dedicated to a Phil player who died due to Covid.

The Phil will continue to livestream. Its venue, the Seifert Performing Arts Center in Salem, has installed livestreaming equipment and will put it to work when it reopens, likely in the fall. "It's not as hard as it looks," DeGennaro says. And, another big plus, it allows the performances to be shown globally. ♥



Donnalee Lozeau of Southern NH Services

The scope of the work of Southern NH Services, one of the state's five Community Action Agencies, is wide: workforce development, Head Start, childcare, nutrition, energy assistance, housing for the elderly and more. Overall, the aim is, as Executive Director Donnalee Lozeau says, "opening the doors of opportunity to people of low income."

With the majority of their services federally or state funded, the service model was primarily face to face. As the pandemic worsened, Lozeau says, "that was turned upside down. Most services were provided remotely. For those without access, we provided other means to get their information." One service that couldn't be provided remotely: childcare. "As the 'helpers,' we could not close. Childcare had to be open for essential workers."

The biggest challenge: "The sheer amount of what had to be done," Lozeau says. In addition to its usual work, the agency was tasked with launching pandemic-related federal assistance, such as the CARES Act Housing Relief Program and the Emergency Rental Assistance Program, "with no playbook." And, she adds, it had to be done "carefully, thoughtfully, safely, efficiently and quickly." ♥ NH



Reach Out, Learn, Support

The Community Kitchen

37 Mechanic St., Keene | (603) 352-3200 | thecommunitykitchen.org

Gibson Center for Senior Services

14 Grove St., North Conway
(603) 356-3231 | gibsoncenter.org

WREN

2011 Main St., Bethlehem
(603) 869-9736 | wrenworks.org

New Hampshire Philharmonic

44 Geremonty Dr.
Seifert Performing Arts Center, Salem
(603) 647-6476 | nhphil.org

New Hampshire Food Bank

700 E. Industrial Park Dr., Manchester
(603) 669-9725 | nhfoodbank.org

CASA of NH

138 Coolidge Ave., Manchester
(603) 626-4600 | casanh.org

Southern NH Services

40 Pine St., Manchester
(603) 668-8010 | snhs.org

Rain for the Sahel and Sahara

222 Court St., Portsmouth
(603) 371-0676 | rain4sahara.org

NH Coalition Against Domestic & Sexual Violence

(603) 224-8893 | nhcadsv.org

Red River Theatres

11 South Main St., Suite L1, Concord
(603) 224-4697 | redrivertheatres.org

The Music Hall

28 Chestnut St., Portsmouth
(603) 436-2400 | themusichall.com

Farnum

140 Queen City Ave., Manchester
(603) 622-3020 | farnumcenter.org

Girls Inc.

1171 S. Willow St., Manchester
(603) 606-1705 | girlsincnewhampshire.org

"Charitable nonprofits feed, heal, shelter, educate, inspire, enlighten, and nurture people of every age, gender, race, and socioeconomic status, from coast to coast, border to border, and beyond. They foster civic engagement and leadership, drive economic growth, and strengthen the fabric of our communities. Every single day." —National Council of Nonprofits