

Rhode Island Foundation

2026 Magazine

# Rhode Island Foundation

2026 Magazine

As Rhode Island's only community foundation, we mobilize generosity and motivate change that makes a difference.

Our local roots, state-wide relationships, and century of experience anchor our work, and our hopes for our home reach high. Since 1916, we've been a funder and true partner to those who help this state thrive, working hard at each table, across every community, by their side to improve the lives of all Rhode Islanders. Only together, through strong partnerships and building on work that's come before, can we create progress that lasts.

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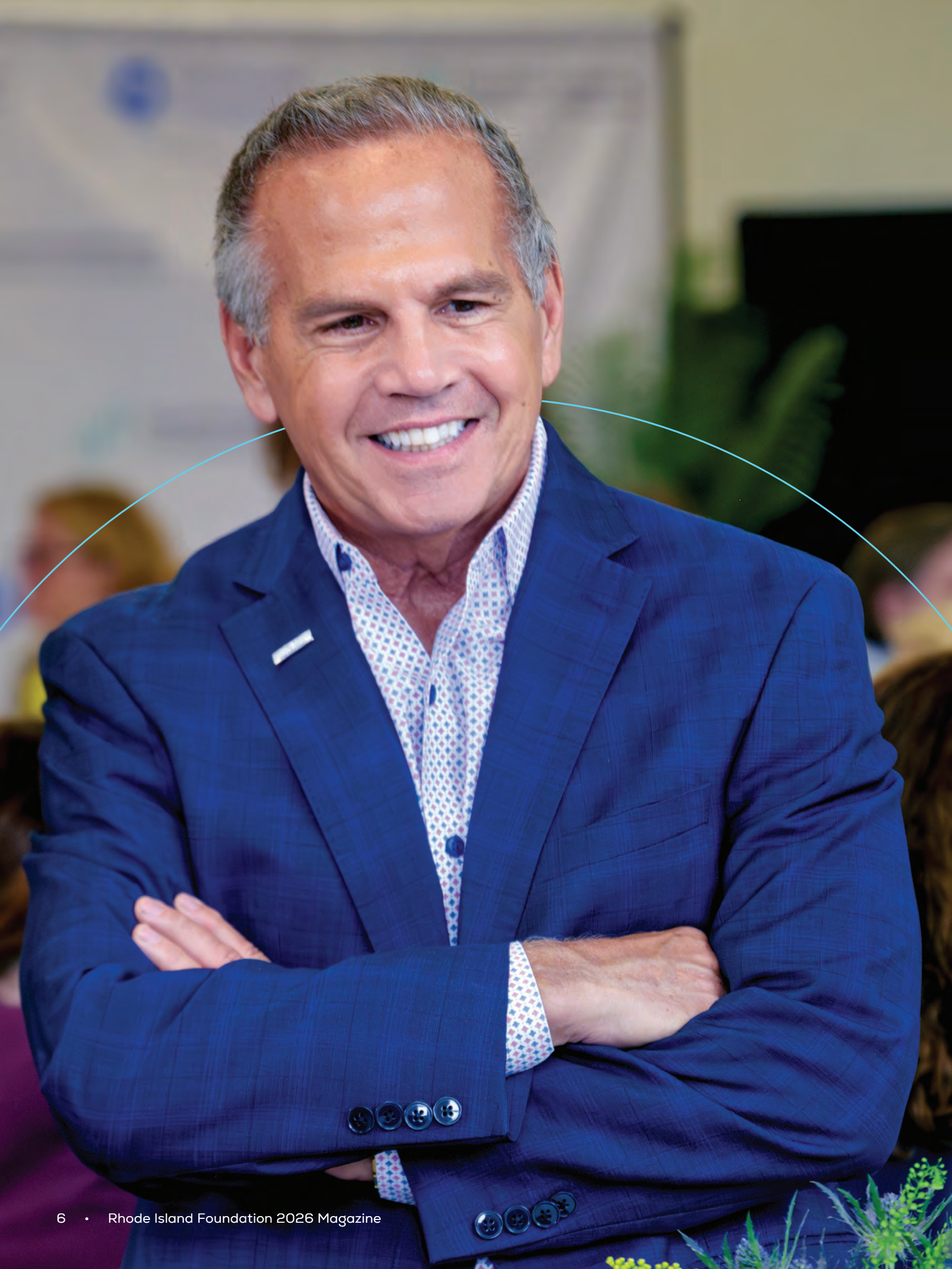
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**October 2026**

Dear Friends,

Every year, this magazine gives us a chance to step back from the day-to-day and tell the stories behind the numbers. In this issue you'll meet students supported by the David L. Taton Family Vocational/Technical Scholarship Fund, for whom roughly $1,000 (less than a month's rent for most Rhode Island families) has been the difference between a closed door and a new chapter.

You'll read about John Murphy, a Fox Point kid who built a lending institution from nothing and spent the rest of his life quietly naming scholarships after the people who shaped him, never himself.

You'll meet Peter Chung, who found his calling advocating for young people in Fiji and now leads Young Voices here in Providence, earning this year's Civic Leadership Award for teaching a new generation that civic engagement is something to practice now, not grow into later.

In Woonsocket, you'll see how a single grant helped the Woonsocket Education Center turn nearly 100 adult learners into 86 graduates, proof that removing one barrier, whether it's cost, transportation, or childcare, can change a family's trajectory.

And you'll hear from Tom Coderre, whose own hard climb out of addiction now shapes a legacy gift aimed at helping others find the same recovery capital — the strengths and supports that make long-term recovery more achievable — that carried him forward.

These stories reflect the same work you can see in our latest round of grants: more than $5.4 million awarded this fall to nonprofits across Rhode Island, bringing our total investment to $18.9 million since launching our current grant programs in 2025. Different stories, same thread. A relatively small, well-placed investment of time, money, or attention tends to ripple further than anyone expects.

If you want even more of these stories in your ears as well as your hands, the new season of our Together RI podcast is here, with 12 new episodes and a lineup of guests bringing fresh perspectives on the people and ideas shaping our communities. Every episode is available now on our website, Apple Podcasts, and Spotify.

Rhode Island's challenges, from the rising cost of food to housing to health care, are real and demanding. But so is the resolve of the people you'll meet in this issue. Thank you for being part of their story, and ours.

With gratitude,

David N. Cicilline
President & CEO
**Rhode Island Foundation**



# The Power of Conexión

Meet the team at Conexión Latina, recipients of the Rhode Island Foundation's 2026 Community Leadership Award, who work to connect Aquidneck Island's Latino community to schools, health care, and civic life through programs like Mujeres Poderosas and the Latino Parent Advisory Committee.

**Hear about their work directly from Conexion Latina executive director, Rebekah Gomez, on our podcast Together RI**





# A Thousand Dollars. A World of Difference.



One thousand dollars.

It's less than a month's rent for most Rhode Island families. Less than a semester's worth of textbooks at a four-year university. In the world of college costs and student debt, it barely registers.

And yet, for the students served by the David L. Taton Family Vocational/Technical Scholarship Fund, approximately $1,000 is what makes a first chance possible, or a second one. It's the difference between a new chapter and a closed door. Between believing a better path is within reach and suspecting it was never meant for you.

The remarkable truth at the heart of this scholarship program: a relatively small amount of money, placed in the right hands at the right moment, changes lives.

There is a particular kind of courage in going back to school when life has already handed you a full plate. These are not traditional students. They're working adults, some juggling jobs and children, some starting over after a layoff, some who just never had the opportunity until now. What they share is a determination to build something more, for themselves and for the people depending on them.

"This is a unique scholarship program," explains Monica Benson, Rhode Island Foundation Scholarship and Special Funds Officer, who oversees the scholarship program. "These applicants include people of all ages. Some are making a life change, navigating a new chapter, or seizing an opportunity they never had before. Some are on public assistance, and for them, this scholarship is a path to self-sufficiency and independence. Others are already working in healthcare or the trades and want to grow — a CNA who becomes certified in phlebotomy, for example, can earn more per hour. We want people to take advantage of this scholarship wherever they are on their journey."

The Taton scholarship is designed for Rhode Island residents with financial need who are pursuing a certificate or credential, not a four-year degree. Eligible programs include CNA training, phlebotomy, medical assisting, EMT certification, electrical apprenticeships, HVAC, automotive and manufacturing, teacher's aide programs, cosmetology, culinary arts, and other career training programs across the state. Applications are accepted on a rolling basis throughout the year, and past recipients are encouraged to reapply as they build on their skills.

"Although these are smaller scholarships — most around $1,000 — they can be transformative. They'll pay for most of the costs of the certification courses," Monica notes.

Since its launch in 2020, the program has grown steadily. In 2024, 56 scholarships were awarded totaling $64,830. In 2025, as new community partnerships brought the scholarship to more students, that grew to 93 scholarships and $89,152 in support. In 2026, 49 scholarships have already been awarded, with applications continuing to come in. Over the years, the program




has put thousands of dollars toward training and professional certification across healthcare, the trades, and education, and the need, both for funding and skilled members of Rhode Island's workforce, continues to grow.

Through intentional outreach and stewardship, the Foundation has built partnerships with Cranston Adult Education, Newport and Aquidneck Island Community Schools, and the Community College of Rhode Island, institutions that serve adult learners seeking career training that now routinely connect their students to this scholarship opportunity.

The voices of those who have received the scholarship best describe the big difference a small investment makes.

When one recipient lost his job of 22 years, he finally had the chance to pursue the electrical career he had always wanted, but with his wife as the household's sole earner, the cost of books and coursework was simply out of reach. "This journey has been incredible," he wrote, "and your support has made a meaningful difference in my life."

For a medical assistant working at Brown University Health's Cancer Institute, the scholarship was more than financial support. Already in the workforce and the first in his family to pursue higher education, he hadn't been sure he would be considered. "For a while, I had started to believe that it might be too late for me to return to this path in a meaningful way or that someone in my position might not be chosen for support like this," he shared. The scholarship changed that. Enrolled in a phlebotomy program to strengthen his skills, something else shifted too. "I can sit in class and completely focus on what I'm learning instead of mentally tracking what I still owe or what I have to delay taking care of." He is now preparing for his certification, has applied to Rhode Island College, and has his sights set on a nursing degree.

"Not only will this be helping me," another recipient wrote, "it will be helping my son, because it will give me the chance to provide him with a better future." For her, the scholarship is the first step on a longer journey, a certificate to gain experience in the medical field, with the goal of becoming a radiologist.

The impact of a $1,000 scholarship does not stop with the person who receives it.

Research consistently shows that when parents achieve academic or professional success, their children are significantly more likely to pursue higher education and meaningful careers of their own. A mother who earns her CNA credential and leaves public assistance is not just changing her own trajectory; she is reshaping what her children believe is possible for themselves. The Taton scholarship, by helping a parent stabilize their career, increase their wages, or gain independence, plants a seed that can change the arc of an entire family.

"For many students, this scholarship is the turning point that allows them to complete a certificate program, secure employment, and move off public assistance," Monica says. "These are individuals striving for independence and stability, and many are single parents working to create a better future for their families."

The program is anchored by the David L. Taton Family Vocational/Technical Scholarship Fund and bolstered by a collection of named funds within the Rhode Island Foundation. The growing demand for skilled workers across Rhode Island has inspired new investment from community partners, with those dollars flowing directly into scholarships for Rhode Island residents. A generous commitment from the Town Fair Tire Foundation will specifically benefit students entering the trades. In response to the growing statewide need for CNAs, the Edward J. and Virginia M. Routhier Foundation has made a vital commitment of $25,000 to help more students enter that critical field.

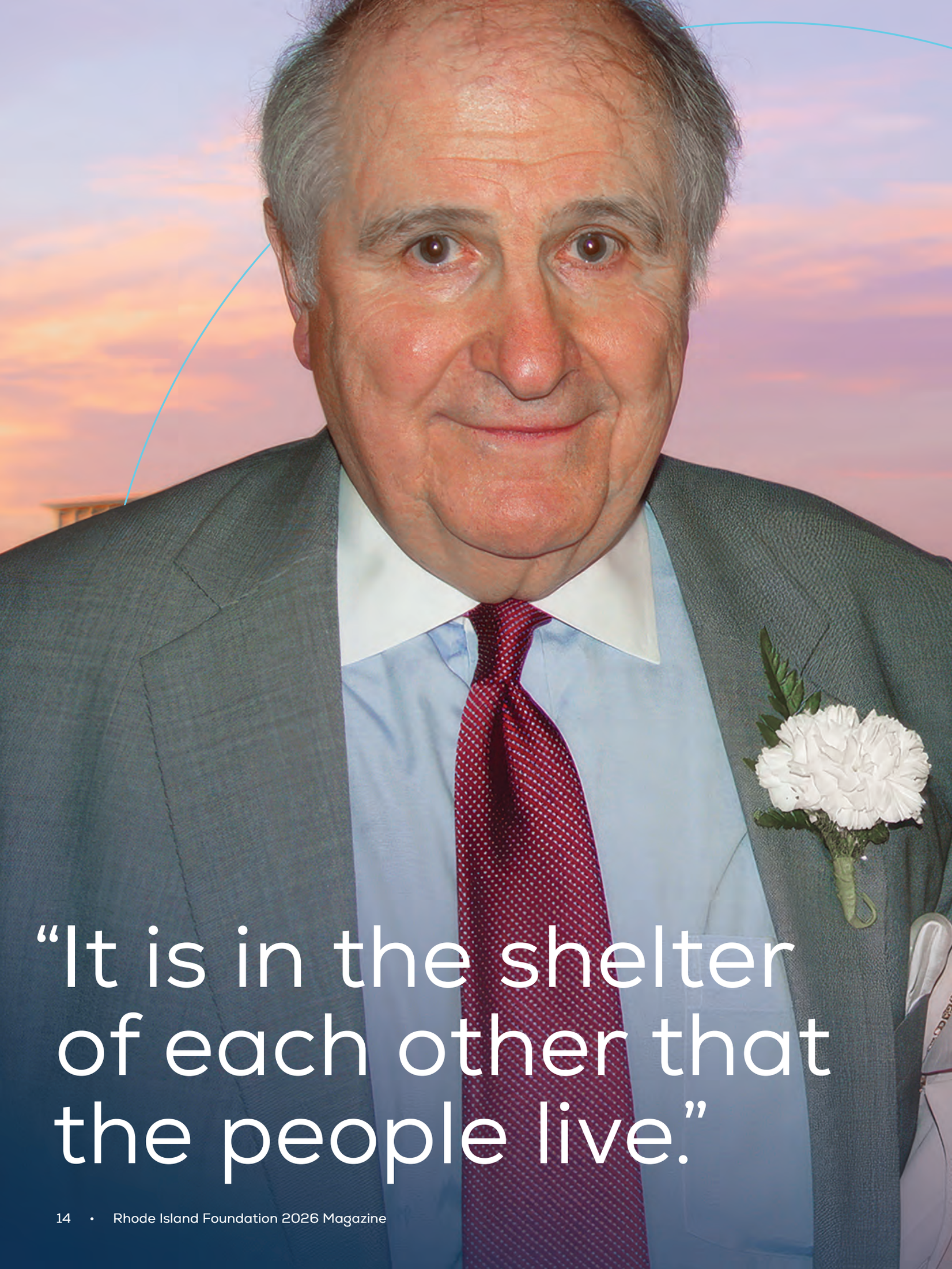
"What your support has given me is not just financial relief, but a greater sense of steadiness and a renewed faith in myself. Not only in what I'm capable of, but in the fact that others are willing to see that in me as well and support my efforts. It has shifted how I see my place on this path, and what feels possible for me within it," shared a student after receiving his award.

The students supported by the Taton scholarship are already doing the hard work. They show up to class after long shifts. They balance families, bills, and the demands of starting something new. They take the first step, the next step, and then the next one. What the David L. Taton Family Vocational/Technical Scholarship Fund provides is a little help at the right moment, and that makes all the difference.

*The David L. Taton Family Vocational/Technical Scholarship Fund is open to Rhode Island residents with demonstrated financial need who are enrolled in a certificate or credential program in preparation for employment. Applications are accepted on a rolling basis throughout the year. Past recipients are eligible to reapply.*

*To learn more about supporting the David L. Taton Family Vocational/Technical Scholarship Fund, please contact Kelly Riley, Stewardship and Cultivation Officer, at (401) 427-4048 or via email at KRiley@RIFoundation.org.*





“It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.”



There are neighborhoods where people live for a time, and then there are neighborhoods that live within people; places so woven into a life, it's difficult to tell where one ends, and the other begins. For John Murphy, that place was Providence's Fox Point, where he was born in 1938, the son of Irish immigrants, raised without a father, and held up by a community that did what communities at their best have always done: looked after one another.

John's mother, Catherine, worked three jobs to keep her small family afloat. She struggled to afford shoes and clothing for her two young sons, yet she found a way to send both John and his older brother Jeremiah to the local Catholic school, the Cleary School in Fox Point. Their father Jeremiah, like Catherine, had come from Ireland, but contracted tuberculosis in the copper mines there, dying when John was just a few months old. But in Fox Point, neighbors looked after neighbors, and St. Joseph's Church, Catherine's extended family, and the Boys Club (now the Boys & Girls Clubs of Providence) provided safe, supportive spaces for John and his brother, Jeremiah, to grow, to learn, and to belong.

John Murphy never forgot his roots. As a man of unwavering faith, a self-made business pioneer, a devoted husband and father, and a philanthropist whose generosity left a lasting mark on Rhode Island and well beyond, he gave back, in full measure, to the neighborhood, people, and places that shaped him.

"My grandmother knew the importance of faith," John's son, Kevin, reflects, "and wanted to instill that in her two sons, especially after losing her husband. She needed to know that they were grounded in something good."

Without a father, John found his first role model in his older brother, Jeremiah, who at eight years old became the man of the house, someone to watch and learn from. It was a quality that would serve John well throughout his life. "My dad was self-taught," Kevin says. "He was always learning; by watching his brother, he learned how to be a man. By watching other bankers, he learned banking. He surrounded himself with people he admired and absorbed everything he could from them."

John graduated from Hope High School in 1956 and served in the Army in Korea before returning to Providence to begin a career that would take him first into insurance and real estate and then into banking. As a city councilman representing Providence's Ward One, John saw every day what his Fox Point neighbors were up against, including how difficult it was for many to afford a home of their own. Drawing on his years of business experience, he resurrected the inactive state charter of Home Loan and Investment Association (now Shoreham Bank, FSB) and built it into a lending institution that served the community he knew and loved, eventually going on to originate billions of dollars in home equity mortgages across the country.



Central to his life was his marriage to Gracilda Sousa, the youngest sister of his close friend Antonio, and the family John and Grace built together: four sons, John, Jr. (Jay), Kevin, Brian, and Daniel, all of whom were raised on faith, hard work, and the conviction that success carries with it an obligation to help those around you.

"He shined the light on others, never himself," Kevin shares. "That's why he endowed scholarships in the names of family members and friends, never in his own name. He shared his success with his community and Rhode Island. That's who he was at his core."

Together, John and Grace gave millions to hospitals, schools, churches, and community organizations. Among their most meaningful commitments was support for the Louverture Cleary School in Haiti, founded by the Providence-based organization, The Haitian Project, and named after the school John had attended as a boy in Fox Point.

For John, it was a place that felt familiar, one that offered children in desperate circumstances the same care, education, and opportunity that the Fox Point community had once given him.

John and Kevin traveled to Haiti together not long after the devastating 2010 earthquake, a missionary trip to visit the Louverture Cleary School. At 72, John was determined to go. The Murphys were met at the airport by Deacon Patrick Moynihan, The Haitian Project's founder, and driven through Port-au-Prince in a pickup truck, with armed guards in the back. The roads zigzagged around rubble and massive holes left by the earthquake. There was no right side or wrong side of the road, Kevin recalls, just survival. At night, father and son shared a room with bunk beds covered by protective mosquito nets, waking with the roosters; to head to the classrooms of the Louverture Cleary School.

"That trip definitely put things in perspective," reflects Kevin. "It was an amazing experience and speaks volumes about my father, echoing what life may have been like for him throughout his childhood and in the army, surviving with little comfort. It brought out his great compassion and support for people who continue to experience hardship."

That concern for the well-being of others guided John's life.

The funds John and Grace established at the Rhode Island Foundation reflect a profoundly personal connection to people

and place, with each fund named for someone loved or admired, each a tribute to family and community.

There's a scholarship fund for children of Providence police officers, named for John's brother Jeremiah, who served the Providence Police Department with distinction for over 30 years, and a fund for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Providence, directed specifically to the Fox Point clubhouse that played such an important role in John's early life. There's a scholarship for middle school students honoring Horace and Reverend Naomi Craig, a police officer and pastor, respectively, who dedicated their lives in service to the people of Fox Point. And there's a scholarship supporting students at St. Patrick Academy, honoring Deacon Charles and Patricia Andrade, beloved figures in Fox Point's Cape Verdean community, who devoted more than 40 years to St. Patrick Church and the people it serves.

> My father had a keen eye and a keen sense of character. He made very close and lasting friendships and honoring them through scholarships was his way of saying their lives mattered."

"Fox Point is a very special place," says Kevin, "and my father never forgot that: the stories, the memories, the people. Irish, Portuguese, Lebanese, Polish, Cape Verdean – it wasn't about that. It was about people supporting each other. My father had a keen eye and a keen sense of character. He made very close and lasting friendships and honoring them through scholarships was his way of saying their lives mattered."

To date, these funds have provided over $500,000 for the education and mentorship of Rhode Island's youth, and that support continues.

On June 13, 2024, John passed away just a few days shy of his 86th birthday, which, according to Kevin, his father was never interested in celebrating. "It just wasn't his style to celebrate himself."

Kevin, a Rhode Island corporate attorney, and his brother, Jay, now lead the John and Gracilda Murphy Family Foundation, carrying forward their parents' mission to advance education, economic opportunity, and the health and wellbeing of Rhode Islanders. Kevin also serves on the Rhode Island Foundation's Professional Advisory Council, a volunteer group of attorneys, accountants, and financial advisors who offer their expertise to the Foundation.

The Murphys' philanthropy has also expanded in other ways. Through the Foundation's aligned funding program, Kevin and Jay now direct contributions toward specific grants already identified and vetted by the Foundation's grantmaking team. "I didn't just want to cut a check," Kevin explains. "I wanted our family's giving to have meaning – donating funds with specific intent, directed toward something my mother and father would be proud of."

By nature, John was a reader, a writer, and a lifelong learner, making notes in the margins of books, jotting down his thoughts on scraps of paper or whatever was close at hand. After John's passing, one of those notes found its way to Kevin. It read: *If not now, when?*

It's a question Kevin returns to often, one that has deepened his family's long-standing relationship with the Rhode Island Foundation, and one he believes anyone who has thought about giving in any measure should ask themselves, too. You don't have to be wealthy to make a difference; you just have to make a start. "We only have so much time, people only have so much money. People need us. If not now, when?"

There's an old Irish proverb that observes, "It is in the shelter of each other that the people live." It speaks to something John Murphy understood at a very young age and that he went on to instill in his family: that people are at their best when they look after one another, that community is not just a place, but a practice, and that the most meaningful legacy you can leave behind is a better life for those who follow.



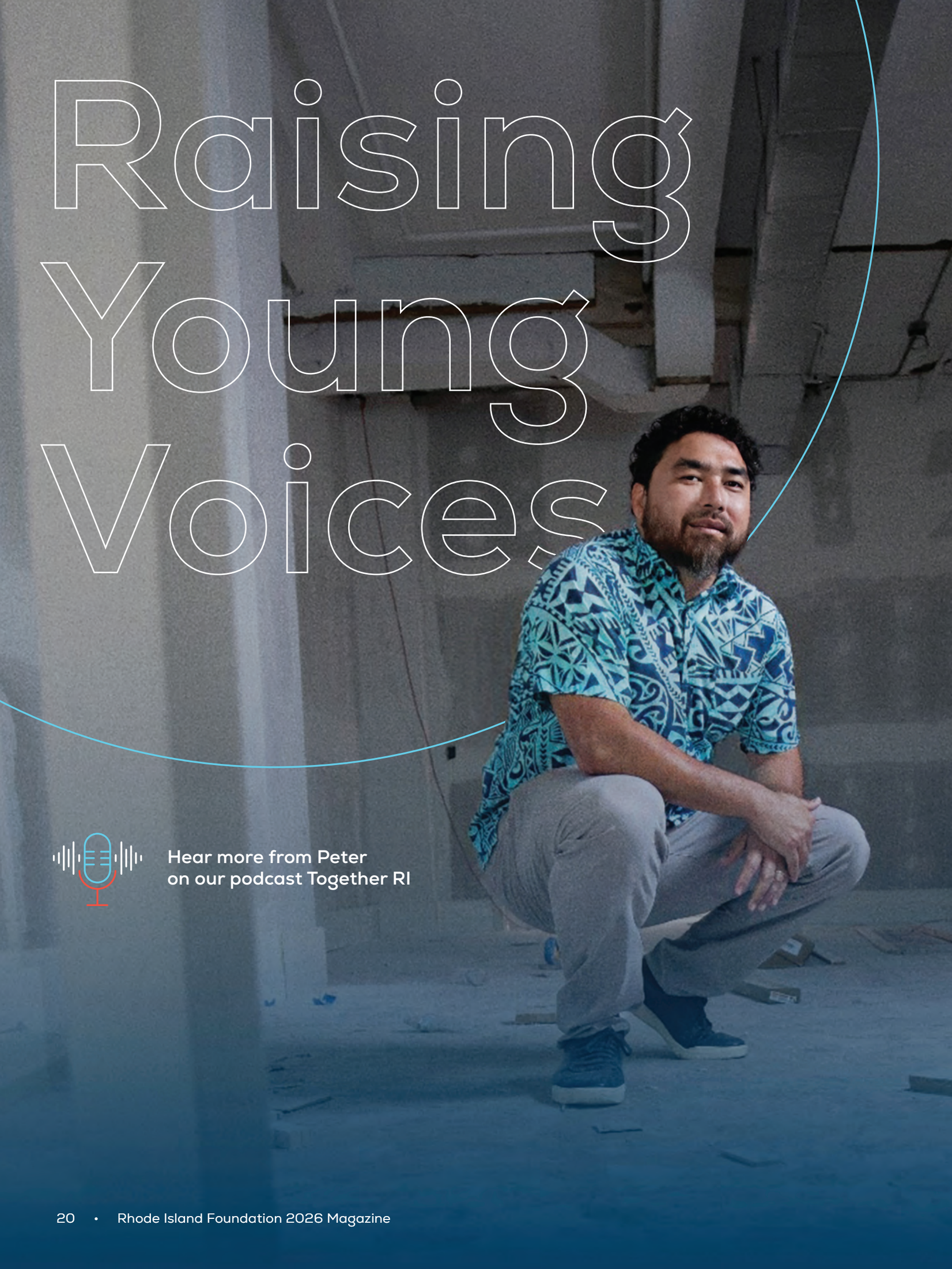
# Cheers to Creativity

This summer, the Rhode Island Foundation hosted its first Drinks with Artists collaboration, the monthly gathering that connects local artists from across the state. The evening honored the Foundation's MacColl Johnson Fellows for their contributions to the arts and culture community, with work from all three Fellows on view in the Foundation's Gallery.

Artist **Steven Johnson** pictured here with his works *"Nap Time," "Had I Dreams Anymore, They Would Be of a Future That I Hope You Would Possess,"* and *"Untitled"*.


HARLEM
36
GLOBETROTTERS

# Raising Young Voices



Hear more from Peter
on our podcast Together RI

"When I read the job description, I thought, 'This is what I did in high school,'" shares Peter Chung, who in 2011 applied to be a Program Coordinator at Young Voices, a Providence nonprofit. Today he's the organization's executive director, empowering young people to challenge the systems that shape their schools and communities and to lead the fight for change themselves.

Sixteen years later, Peter's own path reflects the vision at the heart of Young Voices: civic engagement isn't something young people grow into later. It's something they can practice now. It's a journey the Rhode Island Foundation is honoring with its 2026 Civic Leadership Award, recognizing what Peter's commitment to education, access, and agency has meant for young people across our state.

Peter's route to that work began far from Rhode Island. Born in Fiji to a Tongan mother and a father from mainland China, he was the middle of six children, raised in what he describes as a close-knit culture. "If you visit Fiji, it's the number one thing that you'll notice, how communal it is," he shares. As a teenager, he raced outrigger canoes competitively, eventually earning a spot on Fiji's national team and representing his country at the Pacific Mini Games.

High school is where his interest in advocacy first took hold. Volunteering with Save the Children Fiji under the guidance of a mentor, Peter helped build what would become Kids Link Fiji, born from a question the two of them kept returning to: how do you give young people a voice in decisions about their own rights? The answer to that question came more clearly into focus at a conference in South Korea, where Peter listened to children from Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia describe organizing in their own villages around many of the same economic challenges he recognized at home. "If they can do it, I can do it too," he remembers thinking. Inspired by what he had learned, Peter brought the concept back to Fiji, convening young people at the same village and town meetings where adults gathered, with each group listing its concerns separately, only to discover just how much the two had in common.

He eventually left Fiji for the United States, and after brief stops in Los Angeles and Boston, he settled in Providence, where he's now lived for 18 years, and where, at Young Voices, he worked his way up from that first role to Operations Manager, then Deputy Director, before being named Executive Director in 2020.

Now in its twentieth year, Young Voices was founded on the belief that young people are uniquely positioned to inform the decisions that shape their lives and deserve a real seat at the table when those decisions get made. More than 1,000 young people have come through its programs since. Its year-round Leadership Transformation Academy coaches students in advanced policy analysis, public speaking, and community organizing; its Reimagine Learning initiative puts youth on school redesign committees and has them leading professional development workshops, even teaching classes during the school day; and its college-access program has helped alumni graduate at nearly four times the national rate: 84 percent of Young Voices alumni who enroll in college go on to graduate, compared with just 21 percent among first generation students from lower-income households, nationally.

The organization Peter joined in 2011 was, in his own words, "very grassroots-y," with three staff members, a budget under $300,000, and programming spread across donated church spaces around Providence, before partnering with local schools. It has since grown into something recognized well beyond Rhode Island, drawing praise from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the National Council for Teacher Quality for its work on teacher standards and evaluation.



Among his proudest wins, Peter counts the removal of standardized testing as a Rhode Island graduation requirement, with a single test not always an accurate measure of a student's capability. He credits the five-year effort to the coalition of partners who came together during that time, and, above all, he says, "how much passion young people brought to lead this work." Young Voices students are driving campaigns across the state to bring restorative justice practices into schools, establish a citywide ethnic studies curriculum, adopt trauma-informed policies, and reshape out-of-school-time programming.

Peter is also an alumnus of the Rhode Island Foundation's Equity Leadership Initiative, which offers mid-level professionals and managers in Rhode Island's nonprofit and public sectors a capacity-building opportunity centered on the experiences of people of color, with an emphasis on social-impact management and leadership skill building through an equity focus.

He served on the Foundation's Blue Ribbon Commission, an 18-member panel of educators, parents, municipal officials, and advocates that spent a year studying the state's school funding system, work he calls a natural extension of being invested in public education, both professionally and personally. The commission considered young people's input essential to its findings, and Peter helped to make that happen, working with Brown's Annenberg Institute to recruit students from across the state to review recommendations and testify before legislators.

"They all came with so much empathy," Peter says of the students, recalling how young people from more affluent districts pushed for statewide fixes that wouldn't directly benefit them. The Commission's resulting report, *Equalizing Opportunity: Creating a Fair and Transparent Funding System for Rhode Island's Public Schools*, has since informed legislation moving through the State House.

Beyond Young Voices, Peter has stepped into the role his own mentor once played for him, offering guidance to nonprofit leaders across the state, particularly as federal funding cuts have strained the sector in recent years. His advice echoes a lesson he says he carried out of the pandemic: focus on what you can control.

Deepen the collaborations that you have, " he shares. "We've got to stick together, and we've got to lean on each other in moments like this.



# Congratulations to our 2025/2026 ELI+ graduates!

These leaders are building stronger, more equitable organizations across Rhode Island's nonprofit and public sectors.



## Alexander Sterling

"Using my D.I.S.C. and Emotional Intelligence scores as a guiding star for better understanding my decision-making framework will have the greatest impact on my work."



## Awilda Reinoso Lopez

"The Emotional Intelligence and D.I.S.C. results affirmed how deeply self-aware I am as a leader and clarified the alignment between my core values and the kind of work I'm meant to continue leading."



## Bryana Del Santo

"Understanding my emotional intelligence and strengthening my critical thinking skills will have the greatest impact on my work by advancing language access, compliance, and community trust."



## Chereva McClellan

"Through ELI+, I was reminded that leadership is an ongoing process of reflection, adaptability, trust, and purpose."



## Chiv Heng

"I'm grateful to be in a community with leaders who challenge my understanding of authentic leadership."



## Denezia Fahie

"My ELI+ cohort has provided consistent thought partnership, resulting in more vulnerable, transparent, and trustworthy leadership."



## Genevieve Medina

"Critical Thinking concepts along with my upbringing and biases shape my worldview, relationships, and career. These have the greatest impact on my work."



## Helen Kifle

"Through ELI+, I gained practical leadership tools that I expect to have a lasting impact on my work, particularly strengths-based leadership, adaptive leadership frameworks, and reflective practice."



## Jessica Thigpen

"ELI+ encouraged me to set clear goals for myself, which has helped me become more responsible and focused on my personal growth."



## Lisha Gomes

"Realizing I equated being needed with effectiveness shifted my focus to building sustainable systems."



## Vianella Burgos

"ELI+ has supported me using my voice with clarity, advocating for myself and others, and leading collaboratively with the community."



## Yolanda Davis

"I think my 'aha moment' was when I finally started to understand the impact of having a coach."

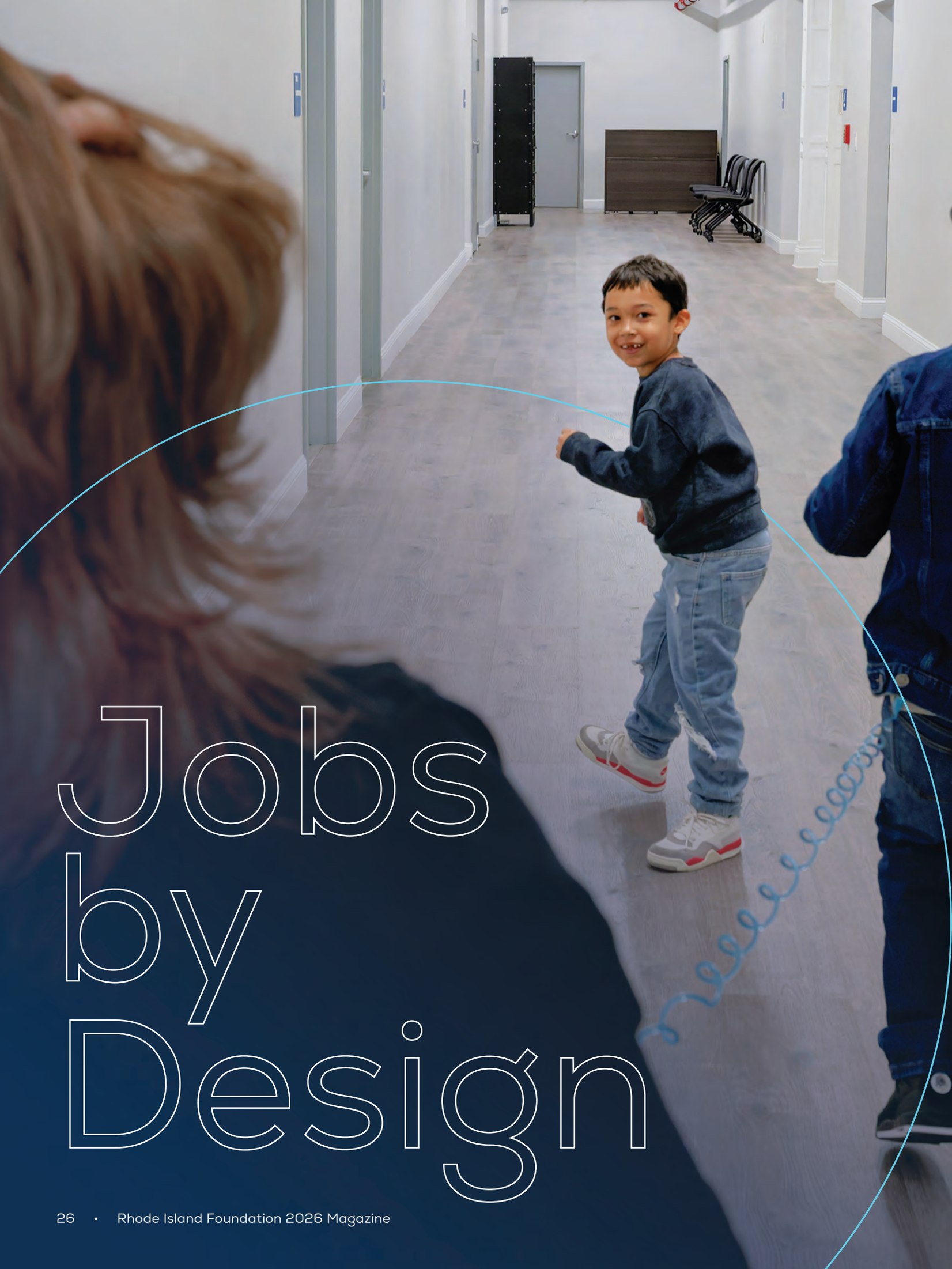
# Civics and Culture at the 1916 Legacy Society Luncheon

As trust in institutions grows more fragile and civic divisions deepen, the Rhode Island Foundation is doubling down on connection, expanding access to trusted local news, and creating spaces for community and cultural life. This is philanthropy with a long view. Research shows that when people are more connected to each other and to their communities, the results are lasting: better health, stronger employment, and greater resilience in times of crisis. It's the kind of investment that outlives any single gift, building a Rhode Island that endures for generations to come.



**Listen to the speaking program on our podcast Together RI**





# Jobs by Design

# Removing barriers to education, employment, and economic mobility.

On Main Street in downtown Woonsocket, a collaborative community training center is helping adults across northern Rhode Island turn education into employment.

Managed by the state's Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner, the Woonsocket Education Center (WOC), opened its doors in August 2022. The Center runs on coordinated partnerships: the state provides the location and oversight, and local educators like Rhode Island College and the Community College of Rhode Island design and teach the coursework. Area hospitals, schools, and businesses inform course offerings, advising which skills are needed to fill essential roles in the area, and, as potential employers, they often go on to hire the Center's graduates.

"Woonsocket Education Center exists to serve adult Rhode Islanders, especially those living in Woonsocket, Central Falls, Pawtucket, and surrounding communities, who are looking to transition into the workforce, change careers, or improve their professional standing via education," said Jill Olson-Crowley, the Center's executive director. "We create pathways to postsecondary education and employment, which in turn helps create the opportunity for individual upward mobility." That mission draws a wide range of people through WOC's doors: career changers, people re-entering the workforce, longtime employees looking to move up, and those just beginning their journey.

What ties this diverse group of students together is WOC's employer-first model. "We choose programs that meet today's workforce needs so that the graduates waste no time between graduation and employment," says Olson-Crowley. "We have relationships with the employers and inform them when newly trained graduates are available for hire. For northern Rhode Island, these real, well-paying jobs exist in healthcare, business, technology, and elementary education. We know that our employer-driven model benefits both job seekers and businesses while simultaneously strengthening the local economy."

Just as central to the model is cost. Every program WOC offers is completely free. "Many adult learners face barriers that extend far beyond classroom work. They worry about tuition, transportation to class, childcare while they are enrolled, learning disabilities, and sometimes language barriers – all of which can prevent talented individuals from pursuing education," Olson-Crowley explains. "Our goal is to remove as many of those barriers as possible so that they can focus on learning, earning a credential, getting a better-paying job, and changing the trajectory of their lives." WOC's model is especially impactful for individuals and families in the region, with Central Falls, Woonsocket, and Pawtucket reporting median household incomes well below the statewide average, and a poverty rate in Central Falls more than double Rhode Island's overall.

The Rhode Island Foundation's support for WOC totals more than $150,000, including a $65,000 Community Priority Grant that gave the model real momentum this past year. The funding allowed WOC to deliver five workforce training cohorts spanning four fields, Microsoft Basics, QuickBooks, Teacher Assistant, and Medication Aide/Technician, for adult learners across Woonsocket, Central Falls, and Pawtucket, in partnership with Rhode Island College and CCRI.

The results exceeded expectations. Against a goal of serving 72 participants, WOC enrolled nearly 100 adult learners and graduated 86 – 64 percent built on skills they already had to move up in their current field, and 36 percent learned new skill sets for new roles. Wage gains were especially strong in healthcare and business tracks: in the Medication Aide/Technician program, all participants were classified as upskilled,



and every unemployed student who responded to a follow-up survey reported receiving a job interview after completing the training. QuickBooks graduates saw meaningful movement out of the lowest income brackets, and Teacher Assistant graduates achieved employment rates as high as 94 percent.

Just as important as the data, though, is what happens after graduation. WOC doesn't simply teach a skill and send participants on their way, it works to ensure a job is waiting on the other side. "We aren't just supporting the training and



education itself," said Carmen Diaz-Jusino, the Rhode Island Foundation's grant officer for the program and its Director for Economic Mobility. "We are also supporting real-time, real-life employment through successful community partnerships." In 2024 alone, graduates of WOC's healthcare, technology, and early childhood education programs went on to secure jobs with Thundermist, Lifespan's Cardiovascular Unit, Koch Eye Associates, Miriam Hospital, and PACE RI. "Employers consistently value Woonsocket Education Center because our programs are built around their workforce needs, creating a stronger pipeline of qualified candidates," said Olson-Crowley.

Among this year's Teacher Assistant program graduates is Enny Sepulveda, who enrolled after her youngest son was diagnosed with autism, ADHD, and anxiety, and she wanted to better understand his rights and how to advocate for him at school. Balancing the training program with four children and a household was challenging, and she did it while navigating a language barrier; English is her second language. "There were nights when I was completely exhausted and days when I wanted to give up," says Enny. "But every time I looked at my son, I remembered why I started. I wanted to understand his world. I wanted to become a better mother. Today, I can honestly say that every sacrifice was worth it."

After completing her training, Enny was hired as a teacher assistant for the Woonsocket School system, a district that regularly turns to WOC to fill these roles.

"Enny's positive, can-do attitude and perseverance inspire me," Olson-Crowley shares. "Her success demonstrates that determination, combined with accessible education, changes lives."

For Woonsocket Superintendent of Schools Dr. Patrick McGee, Enny's story is a tangible example of the wider, sustaining value that accompanies access to education.

"One of the most effective ways we can support our students is by supporting their families," McGee said. "Our partnership with the Woonsocket Education Center is creating real opportunities for families, parents, and community members to gain new skills, earn industry-recognized credentials, and pursue family-sustaining careers – all at no cost to the family. When parents have access to these opportunities, it creates a ripple effect. Families become stronger, students see what's possible through hard work and education, and our entire community reaps the benefits."

Also among WOC's graduates is Emely, who had been discouraged from pursuing a career in healthcare because she uses a wheelchair. The Center's accessible facility, supportive learning environment, and employer-focused training resulted in her successful completion of its patient support specialist program.

Between career changes, physical challenges, language, and financial need, the barriers WOC's students face vary widely. What remains constant are the Center's guiding principles: that education should be within reach for everyone, and removing what stands in the way is central to its work.

Olson-Crowley is direct about what the Foundation's support has made possible. "The Rhode Island Foundation's investment has done far more than fund workforce classes," she said. "It's enabled Woonsocket Education Center to keep workforce training programs free; expand our partnerships with educators and employers; respond quickly to changing employer demand; and to reach adults who otherwise could not participate."

This funding reflects the kind of work the Foundation prioritizes across Rhode Island: connecting education, jobs, and opportunity. Removing a single barrier, whatever form it takes, can change the trajectory for a student, a family, and a community.

Ultimately, Olson-Crowley says she's most proud, not of the enrollment figures, but of the personal and professional growth participants experience over the course of a program. "Many arrive uncertain about their abilities and leave believing they can succeed in college, in the workplace, and in life."



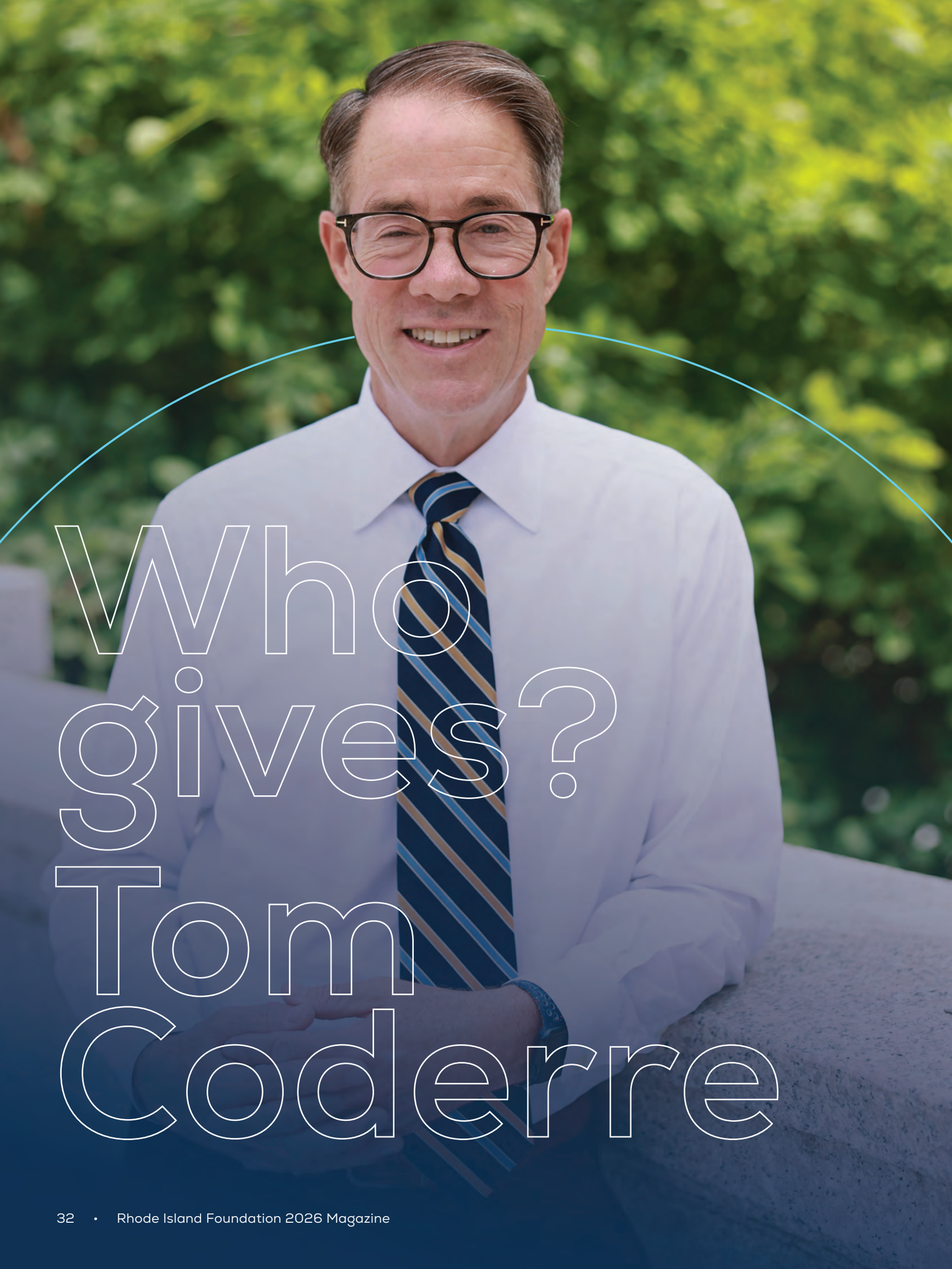
# Reimagining Local Journalism

Pam Johnston has spent her career disrupting the status quo for the common good. As President and CEO of Ocean State Media, she guided the merger of two of Rhode Island's premier news organizations, reimagining how to deliver the trusted local journalism the state depends on. For that bold, community-centered vision, she received the Rhode Island Foundation's Trailblazer Award.



**Hear more from Pam on our podcast Together RI**


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# Who gives? Tom Coderre

At the age of 25, Tom Coderre won a seat in the Rhode Island Senate, the kind of early success many people spend an entire career pursuing. But it would take a difficult, determined climb out of addiction to find the purpose that defines him now: helping others get the support that lasting recovery requires.

Tom grew up in Pawtucket and followed his mother, Elaine, a longtime state representative, into public service. By his own account, it was an overwhelming and high-pressure introduction to political life. And behind the scenes, Tom was struggling with addiction, one that, in time, cost him nearly everything he cared about, including his Senate seat. Recovery did not come easily, or all at once. After several setbacks, Tom found his way into sustained, long-term recovery and began rebuilding his life with intention. He completed the bachelor's degree he'd left unfinished at Rhode Island College, and began building, piece by piece, the emotional, professional, and financial stability that would carry him forward.

That rebuilding included work for Faces & Voices of Recovery, a national recovery advocacy organization, and then six legislative sessions as Chief of Staff to the Rhode Island Senate President Teresa Paiva Weed. Tom later joined the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and held both political and career roles over the years, from senior advisor in Washington, D.C., to his current role as a senior executive at SAMHSA. He's also writing a book about what he calls 'recovery capital': the internal and external resources – stable housing, quality education, employment, financial security, healthy relationships, and a sense of purpose – that people overcoming addiction can draw upon to initiate and sustain recovery and build healthy, meaningful lives.

Tom recently became a new member of the Rhode Island Foundation's 1916 Society, and a gift from his estate will establish the Tom Coderre Addiction Recovery Legacy Fund for organizations and programs that help people build recovery capital, something he believes rarely gets the attention it deserves. He also hopes the fund will spark a broader culture of recovery philanthropy. People whose lives have been touched by cancer, heart disease, and other health conditions often make those causes part of their charitable giving. With millions of Americans living in recovery, Tom believes the recovery community represents an enormous, largely unrealized philanthropic force—one that could collectively invest in helping future generations find recovery.

"You don't have to be wealthy to get involved," he shares. "Everyone leaves something behind eventually…the question is what do you want it to do."

## Which talent would you most like to have?

I enjoy biking, so maybe having the ability to ride the Tour de France. I'm pretty sure sticking to local bike paths is safer!

## What do you consider your greatest achievement?

Finding recovery and building a life I never could have imagined when I was struggling with addiction.

## What do you most value in your friends?

Loyalty, certainly, but also emotional connection. The older I get, the more I value the people with whom I can be completely myself.

## Who are your heroes in real life?

My parents are heroes to me. They sacrificed a lot for me and my family to have the life we have today. Ten years ago, I would have named a famous person, but the older I get, the more appreciation I have for them and how much of who I am came from them.

## What is your greatest regret?

I try not to live with regret. There are certainly things I wish I had done differently, especially during my addiction, but those experiences are also part of what made me who I am. Recovery has taught me that I can't change the past, but I can decide what I do with it.

## What is your idea of perfect happiness?

Being comfortable in my own skin, knowing who I am, being surrounded by people I love, and feeling that I'm using my life for something that matters.

## What do you love about Rhode Island?

It's home. I love the people, the beauty, the food, and the sense of community here. I've lived in other places and haven't felt that same sense of togetherness, that bond. It always draws me back.

## What do you appreciate about the Rhode Island Foundation?

My relationship with the Foundation as a donor is new, but I've worked with it in different capacities throughout my career. I've always appreciated its ability to take the long view: bringing people together around Rhode Island's toughest challenges and making strategic investments that can strengthen communities for generations. That's one of the reasons it felt like the right home for this legacy.

## What is your motto?

"Every day's a holiday." I've been saying it for years. It doesn't mean every day is easy or that everything is always great. It's a reminder to approach life with gratitude and optimism, even when I don't necessarily feel that way in the moment. I've been given a life I once came very close to losing. I try not to forget that.

# A Lifetime of Care

For more than 65 years, Penny Sparfven has devoted herself to nursing, as a Registered Nurse, a mentor to scholarship recipients, and the founder of a fund at the Rhode Island Foundation established in memory of her mother, Ethel, also a nurse. Her dedication has helped make possible more than $400,000 in annual nursing scholarships, and countless students are nurses today because of her.



**Hear from our 2026 Rhode Island Foundation scholars on our podcast Together RI**



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**Cover Art:** MacColl Johnson Fellow Kirstin Lamb's *"Pouch Cove Coastal Newfoundland Sunrise,"* courtesy of Gallery NAGA and the artist.