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“We Follow Their Lead.” How Residents Guide the Black Belt Community Foundation’s Grantmaking

Mike Scutari | September 05, 2023



COMMUNITY ASSOCIATES AND BBCF STAFF AT A JUNE 2023 COMMUNITY ASSOCIATES RETREAT. PHOTO COURTESY OF BLACK BELT COMMUNITY FOUNDATION.

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In the late 1990s, two groups of civic leaders working independently of each other sought to establish a community foundation in Alabama's rural Black Belt region, known historically for its rich soil as well as its majority Black population. Representatives contacted the Ford Foundation for support, and in 2002, they met with program officer Linetta Gilbert, who encouraged them to join forces.

They heeded Gilbert's advice, and in November of that year, the unified group, calling itself the Black Belt Regional Coordinating Committee, received a \$100,000 planning grant from Ford. After conducting extensive community meetings across the next year, leaders established the [Black Belt Community Foundation](#) (BBCF) in December 2003.

BBCF's current president Felecia Lucky worked with the committee as a community volunteer. Looking back, she told me that BBCF's founders said to Ford officials at the time, "We want to make sure the community owns this, because if it doesn't, it will fail. The only way to create lasting change is to do it with those who are creating the change."

The founders stayed true to that vision. BBCF conducts its discretionary grantmaking through a participatory model, relying on volunteer community associates embedded in each of the 12 counties the foundation serves. Associates help nonprofits apply for grants, decide where the support flows, donate personal funds and raise money. "They'll tell us, 'I don't think this will work well,' or 'I think we should do it this way,'" Lucky



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said. “They are very knowledgeable about their communities and we follow their lead.”

BBCF is an instructive case study at a time when some funders are seeking to build stronger ties with the communities they serve, and sometimes, to include them directly in the giving process. It has given out over \$3 million to organizations in the arts, community and economic development, education, and health and wellness, embracing “[power sharing](#)” and trust-based philanthropy long before the terms became common in the philanthropic lexicon. “Even though we have board members representing each county, it is important to have people doing work in the community and sharing messages about grant opportunities and programming,” Lucky said. “If you’re a foundation serving 12 marginalized communities, those communities need to see themselves as part of the foundation.”

“I had never heard of anything like that before”

Born and raised in the Black Belt town of Livingston, Lucky earned a bachelor’s degree in accounting at Tuskegee University and an MBA from the University of Alabama. She went on to work in corporate America, holding positions in Minneapolis and Memphis, until a job focused on [economic development work](#) brought her back home in 1995. (The Black Belt region got its name for its rich soil; the term’s racial connotation emerged in the 19th century when enslaved Black people worked on its cotton plantations.)

Lucky got involved with the Black Belt Regional Coordinating Committee in 2002 and was immediately

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struck by the planners' inclusive mindset. "Oftentimes, folks say, 'This is what needs to be done for the betterment of your community,'" she said. "But instead, it was, 'We're going to work with you and [make] sure the community wants it before we build it.' I had never heard of anything like that before, and it was very clear that the founding board did not want to create something that already existed."

When the foundation put out a call for a president, Lucky applied for the position after receiving encouragement from BBCF board member and #MeToo movement founder [Tarana Burke](#). She assumed her duties in May 2004. The BBCF and Lucky also work closely with the Southern Black Girls and Women's Consortium, a group of Black women philanthropists aiming to [raise \\$100 million](#) for Black girls and women-focused organizations over a 10-year period.

Digging into BBCF's community associate model

As someone who follows trends in trust-based philanthropy and [participatory grantmaking](#), I'm constantly reminded that there's no "one-size-fits-all" approach. Funding leaders have varying levels of risk tolerance, and that informs how much power they're willing to hand off to outside parties. Looking at BBCF's practice of positioning its community associates as jacks-of-all-trades community liaisons, it's probably safe to say its approach falls on "maximalist" side of the power-sharing spectrum.

Lucky walked me through the process, explaining that an individual who wishes to become a community associate contacts a coordinator working with the foundation “to make sure it’s a good fit on both ends.” Next, they go through an orientation and sign a pledge to attend meetings and trainings, help organizations navigate the [grant application process](#), donate personal funds and raise money. Lucky estimates that the typical county in BBCF’s 12-county service area has an average of 10 community associates. “We always have at least 100 active associates at any given moment,” she said.

The BBCF board allocates funding for each county to be used for grants, and when possible, matches individual donations up to a certain amount. “We don’t have a large endowment where we’re getting regular pools of funding,” Lucky said. “Most of our funding comes from individual donations.” Community associates make up a majority of the representation of each county’s grantmaking review committee, which includes a BBCF board member and staff member. (The application window for the BBCF’s 2023 [Community Grants Cycle](#) closed on June 1.)

This year, the BBCF’s Community Grants program formally adopted [trust-based philanthropy](#) principles as a framework for its giving, and associates attended several workshops on the topic. “All of what we’ve done can be considered trust-based philanthropy, even if we didn’t call it that,” Lucky said. “As we continue to operate along those lines, we’ll be looking for other learning opportunities so we can grow from it together.”

An expansive portfolio

The foundation's activities extend beyond just grantmaking. BBCF has sought to foster local control and participation in other ways, too. Prior to 2017, for instance, the Denver-based Community Development Institute Head Start administered the region's Head Start program. That changed after BBCF leaders met with Congresswoman Terri Sewell, who [encouraged the foundation](#) to oversee the program. In 2017, the BBCF received a \$1.4 million U.S. Department of Health and Human Services grant to bring the program under local control in four Black Belt counties. "It was a beautiful thing because the community wanted to own it," Lucky said.

Other examples abound. BBCF associates played an integral role in boosting participation in the [2020 Census](#), [earning plaudits](#) from Governor Kay Ivey. During the pandemic, community associates helped community members access emergency state funding through a recovery grant fund established by the BBCF. "The state agencies sent out emails and hoped people would respond," Lucky said, noting that some local officials didn't even know the funding was available. "The associates on the ground connected us to where there was need in the community."

Cognizant that storms have historically hit certain parts of the area multiple times, the BBCF board allocated over \$300,000 in funding to create eight shelters across four counties for residents, many of whom live in homes without basements. It was a prescient move. This January, storms ravaged the region, and the BBCF sprung into action through its

Communities Helping Communities Disaster Fund, which was created in 2008. Looking ahead, the board wants to construct additional shelters so residents in each of the counties under its jurisdiction have a place to go when a storm hits. Other priorities include tackling healthcare challenges and ensuring that “that no child is impacted by food insecurity in our region,” Lucky said.

With the foundation poised to celebrate its 20th anniversary in December, a reflective Lucky has mixed feelings about philanthropy’s overall track record of shifting power to community members. On one hand, she takes comfort in knowing that other funders are committed to that work. “We’re not alone in this journey,” she said, citing the Blacksburg, Virginia-based Community Foundation of the New River Valley, which was an inspiration for the BBCF’s founders in the late 1990s.

But Lucky also wishes that other funders — particularly those with much deeper pockets — would lean more heavily into trust-based practices. “I understand why folks don’t do this, because it is difficult,” she said, discussing the need to “constantly equip our associates so they are always at their most powerful” and build durable relationships.

“The issues that we’re addressing did not happen in a year’s time,” she said. “We need partners who will come to the table long-term and will not be afraid to invest financial capital and their other philanthropic capital to make change at the community level.”

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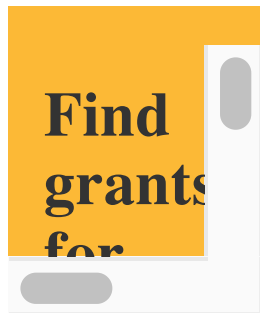
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