The Colorado Health Foundation™



Who We Stand With and How We Show Up

My dear friend Carly Hare, who also goes by her Pawnee name of *<i kita u hoo <i]a hiks* which translates into "kind leader of men," once said something that really stuck with me:

"What if we pretend the community members we speak to are our cousins that have been wronged before?"

To me, this quote is about kinship and compassion. When you go a layer deeper, it's about a *collective* sense of belonging and empathy for one another. It's about evolving our perspectives on not only how we *view* our neighbors, colleagues and friends, but how we *treat* them.

To bring health in reach for all Coloradans, it is essential we learn from them about what they need most and how we can best respond to their needs. We recognize our mission cannot be met until we better understand how Coloradans actually feel, what their lives are like, where they live and how they live.

What does this mean?

As I think about how I got into this work, I often consider my own identity and the communities I belong to: the Black community, the philanthropic community, the Colorado community, social workers from my graduate schooling in Chicago, rural and urban communities across North Carolina (my original home) and of course, the "first-time mom club." I see, more than ever, the value of remembering my roots – who I am, where I come from and what my responsibilities are. That's what we strive for in our community work. We want to recognize and honor each of these elements of identity for those we serve to see the connections between our identities and theirs.

It means we have to find how we fit into the communities that make up Colorado. It means we travel and visit and spend time learning. Our staff find themselves out on the road in different parts of the state. With each trip, it's fair to say that we find ourselves nestling into each community a little deeper. We meet a few more Coloradans. We walk and drive around a few more corners and mountain passes. We sit in coffee shops. We walk around parks and neighborhoods. We hear new stories.

Our work at the Foundation is centered on building relationships and looking for opportunities where our resources can support communities as they move toward better health.

Carly's quote – and what it evokes – helps keep me grounded in this notion of kinship and connectedness. I think of it as a framing tool to help chisel away at a practical understanding of what it truly takes to engage with people in meaningful ways.

What do we mean by "community"? We hear it every day in various contexts – "community." What does that word mean to our staff and me?

We consider it in two ways:

1. *What is community?*
2. *What does it mean to be engaged in and/or with a community?*

First, **we define community as groups of people who live or work in a shared location – regions, counties, neighborhoods – and share common characteristics – interests, histories, cultures, etc.** There is often commonality in a community, one that recognizes distinct groups and their unique compositions.

When it comes to actually engaging in community, we ask ourselves questions that challenge us to think more deeply about how we show up and act:

"What does it mean to be there – to be truly present with others in community? What fosters a sense of genuine connection? How can we work to build these connections and work together to improve health in communities?

We learn as much as we can about the local culture, and what makes each place unique. We try to understand the local history, what gives a community pride and how they view challenges. We spend time being there and also try not to get in the way. We acknowledge the power dynamic that accompanies our every move, as we seek to understand and find opportunities to encourage and support community members with the will to create effective and withstanding solutions that address their needs.

To create impact for individuals and families, we understand that a sense of connection must be cultivated – and that it goes both ways. Again, I'm reminded of this idea of kinship.

Staying grounded through our cornerstones.

As we talk about how our work in community takes shape, we keep our cornerstones – the "essentials of who and what we stand for" – front and center. They help ensure all we do has an impact on those who need it most, and make clear that we will only engage in opportunities that seek to do so.

1. **We serve Coloradans who live on low income and historically have had less power or privilege.** *We stand for Coloradans living on low income – that is our baseline. We stand for communities of color. LGBTQ individuals. Immigrant and refugee communities. Those living with disabilities. Folks in rural and frontier Colorado. Simply put, we stand for all Coloradans for whom good health is out of reach.*
2. **We intend to create health equity.** *Achieving health equity is deeply personal. We know each person and family has differing circumstances, challenges and opportunities. By staying laser focused on bridging these*

gaps, the change we seek is that Coloradans indeed have what they need to be healthy.

3. **We are informed by community and those we exist to serve.** *We turn to communities to share with us their experiences and ideas on what they need to have health in reach. We are listening, soaking in all that we learn and paying careful attention to ensure that equity is at the heart of everything we do.*

While I personally thrive in environments where I can meet new people and hear what they care about, I also have a responsibility to balance the reality of what my presence as a Foundation staff member means: I have access to resources and a mission to meet.

As a Foundation, we cannot truly "belong" in community the way the people who call it home do, but we strive to be a trusted outsider. We want to channel the concept of treating one another like family, friends and neighbors, because we know that positive change in community begins with connection.

So what are we looking to do now?

We remind ourselves to stay humble, and we ask that you keep us in check. There will be missteps and opportunities to course correct. There will be times of disagreement and discomfort. There will be moments we must go back to the drawing board and readjust as we go – making different decisions, asking different questions and so on.

We know philanthropy has the potential to have a profound impact by supporting communities to recognize and act on their own ideas and power.

When I think of the Colorado I want my daughter to see in her lifetime, it's one where everyone's voice is heard loud and clear. It's one where we can put real challenges on the table and have real conversations about what we can do better. And it's one where health is *actually* in reach for all our Colorado cousins.

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