



HOPE

# Grassroots philanthropy on the prairie

A group of teachers leads a community to band together to provide for the urgent needs of its least fortunate students.

**By Joanne M. Marshall**

**T**wenty-one students were homeless. One student had asked a cafeteria worker on a Friday afternoon for leftover food to take home for the weekend. Those were among the facts that high school English teacher Ann Haugland heard at a professional development event in her Boone, Iowa, Community School District.

“I couldn’t sleep that night,” Haugland said. The next morning, she presented her superintendent with a plan: Let’s have a one-day fundraiser for needy students in the district. The superintendent gave permission, but said the fundraising had to be separate from the school’s own foundation.

Haugland quickly found three other teachers, Rhonda Getschman,

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Jane Dupuis, and Georgiann Hagen, who were willing to help organize a fundraiser the following month. They asked departments in the schools to donate gift baskets to be auctioned. They ran a coffee shop and bake sale, serving coffee and hot cider in mugs that people could keep.

“We thought we’d make \$1,000,” Haugland said. Instead, they raised nearly \$15,000.

Rather than make this a one-time, feel-good event, the three teachers saw the potential for doing more. So, they started their own philanthropy.

In six years, the Boone Hope Foundation that the teachers created has given away over \$130,000 to help students with emergency needs related to food, clothing, shelter, and health care. The foundation serves about 100 families per year. About one-third of the assistance goes toward rent, about one-third for utilities, and the other third toward a combination of assistance for food, clothing, or health care.

According to Jim Collogan, director of the National School Foundation Association, the Boone Hope Foundation is the only teacher-led charitable foundation of its kind.

### Typical community

Boone, Iowa, is not a wealthy community. According to the 2010 U.S. Census data, median household income for Boone County was about \$49,578, slightly lower than the national average of \$51,914, but higher than the state average of 48,872. In 2009-10, the number of Boone students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch across the schools ranged from slightly above 40% at the elementary schools to 60% at the alternative school. Neither is it exceptionally large — Boone has only about 12,000 residents. In spite of its size, the foundation raises about \$15,000 each year to give away.

The Hope Foundation’s mission is “to provide comfort to our community’s children in emergency-type situations.” Seven foundation board members decide how to respond to various student assistance requests. Those board members include the original three teacher leaders plus four other teachers, counselors, and nurses. Because the foundation is separate

from the Boone public schools, it also serves children who attend two parochial schools in the community. Each school building has at least one designated representative to the foundation. Any staff member at any school who sees a student in need can either contact a building representative or a member of the foundation board. The board tries to make a decision within 48 hours. A board member will then notify the requesting staff member of the status of the request, and then contact the family in need.

For example, if a bus driver notices that Bert’s winter coat does not zip, the driver notifies Sue, the middle school counselor who is also a foundation board member, that he might need a new coat. Sue e-mails other foundation board members about the need. Jane Dupuis, who keeps track of which families have been assisted, checks to see if the student’s family already has been helped that year. If the family has not received assistance and if the rest of the board agrees, Dupuis approves the request and takes a Wal-Mart gift card to the middle school to give to Sue. Sue notifies the student’s family that the Hope Foundation has a gift card to enable them to buy Bert a new coat and arranges to deliver the gift card to them. She also tells the bus driver that Bert’s family has been given a Wal-Mart gift card for a new coat.

Relying on staff referrals for student needs serves at least two purposes: It involves all staff members in being aware of student needs and acting upon them, and it adds a layer of legitimacy and accountability for incoming requests. Foundation board members estimate that over 90% of their school staff is involved with the fundraiser every year and that part of that high involvement is due both to their own participation in the referral process and to their knowledge that funds go directly to families rather than to administrative costs or salaries.

Keeping track of the giving is fairly simple. Getschman and Dupuis created a form that they fill out when a staff member makes a request. It includes the name of the student and family, the name of the referring staff member, the amount and type of request, the date, and the purpose of the request.



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## Notes for would-be philanthropists

**Provide information about local poverty.** Boone's teacher leaders would not have known the extent of student poverty and need in their district if they had not been part of a seminar that provided that information, including some specific examples. Haugland says that several educators from other districts have told her that they admire the Hope Foundation's work, but that they don't have students with such needs in their district. That assumption probably isn't accurate. But, without data from their own districts, they hold firm in their assumption.

**Let leaders lead.** Although the Boone school district couldn't operate the Hope Foundation as a school-administered organization, the superintendent and building administration support the foundation in informal ways such as donating baskets and providing time for announcements and volunteer sign-ups during staff meetings. Earlier in 2011, the administration featured the foundation during a training day on local resources available for students and their families

**Build relationships.** The recession of the last few years has certainly affected many schools. However, the example of the Boone Hope Foundation shows that people are willing to give charitably, even in tough economic times. Why? In this case, because they know their giving benefits students in their own community. They trust the teacher leaders who run the foundation. They are themselves involved as volunteers, as people who refer students for assistance, and as people who have received assistance. They work together.

At least two board members must sign the form for funds or gift cards to be disbursed, which again provides accountability for funds. Records are also entered into a spreadsheet to track the type of assistance and who has been helped over time.

### A Band-Aid, not a solution

The foundation's teacher leaders often refer to the assistance they give as a Band-Aid for a family's needs. They know they're not eradicating poverty. Their intention is simply to show students and their families that the school staff cares about them. Thus, they have decided to help a family only once, unless there are extenuating circumstances. Most of the requests are small. If a request is unusually large, such as a \$1,000 mortgage payment request, the foundation may only provide \$500 of it in order to reserve funds to be able to assist other families.

While the board wishes to conserve funds so that they can assist more families, they also have decided that they intend to assist every family that they can. They do not try to build up savings, instead saying, "When it's gone, it's gone." Every year, right before the fundraiser, the foundation's balance drops close to zero. However, the fundraiser always replenishes the account. (In 2011, for the first time, the foundation ran out of funds before the fundraiser. In early November, a month before the fundraiser, the community moved to help, sending donations, and the National Honor Society chapter ran a bake sale during parent-teacher conferences, but the foundation had to turn some families away.)

Because the board wants to preserve its principle of only assisting a family once but also acknowledges that families might still need assistance, during the 2010-11 school year, the board put together emergency food packages. Representatives at each school building have at least one grocery bag containing staples such as pasta and sauce, cereal, and peanut butter so that, if a family needs food and has already been assisted by the foundation once, they can still be provided with food "to get by a little longer." Teacher leaders buy in bulk to fill the bags, which they estimate cost about \$17 each.

### Trust

When the foundation started, they asked families to provide receipts for their expenses, which board members would then staple to the original request form. But that process became too onerous. The foundation makes payments directly to the utility company or a landlord. But there is an element of trust involved, especially when families receive gift cards, as in the example of giving Bert's family a Wal-Mart gift card for a winter coat. "We don't follow them through the store to see what they purchase,"

said one board member. Having a staff member refer the student for assistance means the staff member can follow up to see if a new coat has been bought.

However, as the foundation has grown older and the community has become more aware of it, board members worry more about their trust being abused. They try to avoid assistance requests directly from families. Once, a family that was aware of the rule that they could be assisted only once asked different staff members for assistance on behalf of their children, apparently hoping the foundation board would see the children's different last names and not realize it was the same family. In addition, other social service agencies in the community, particularly as their own budgets shrink, sometimes suggest to a family that they should seek assistance from the Hope Foundation. The teacher leaders struggle with these requests, wanting them instead to come from school staff members, but acknowledge that the foundation has become one of the community's social services resources.

### School, community involvement

Beyond helping needy families, the foundation also has brought together the school community in a common project. About 90 school groups com-

pete good-naturedly in putting together gift baskets to be auctioned — from the Spanish department's Mexican fiesta basket to the administrative leadership team's gift card basket to the food service staff's basket of holiday plates and table settings. Staff members also volunteer to serve on 18 sepa-

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rate committees that organize or facilitate elements of the festival, ranging from entertainment to the thank you-note committee, which sent thank you notes and receipts for donors or buyers. Two years ago, the foundation also sold over a thousand cookbooks at \$10 each, with recipes contributed from staff members.

Community members attend the fundraiser, but they also support the Hope Foundation in other



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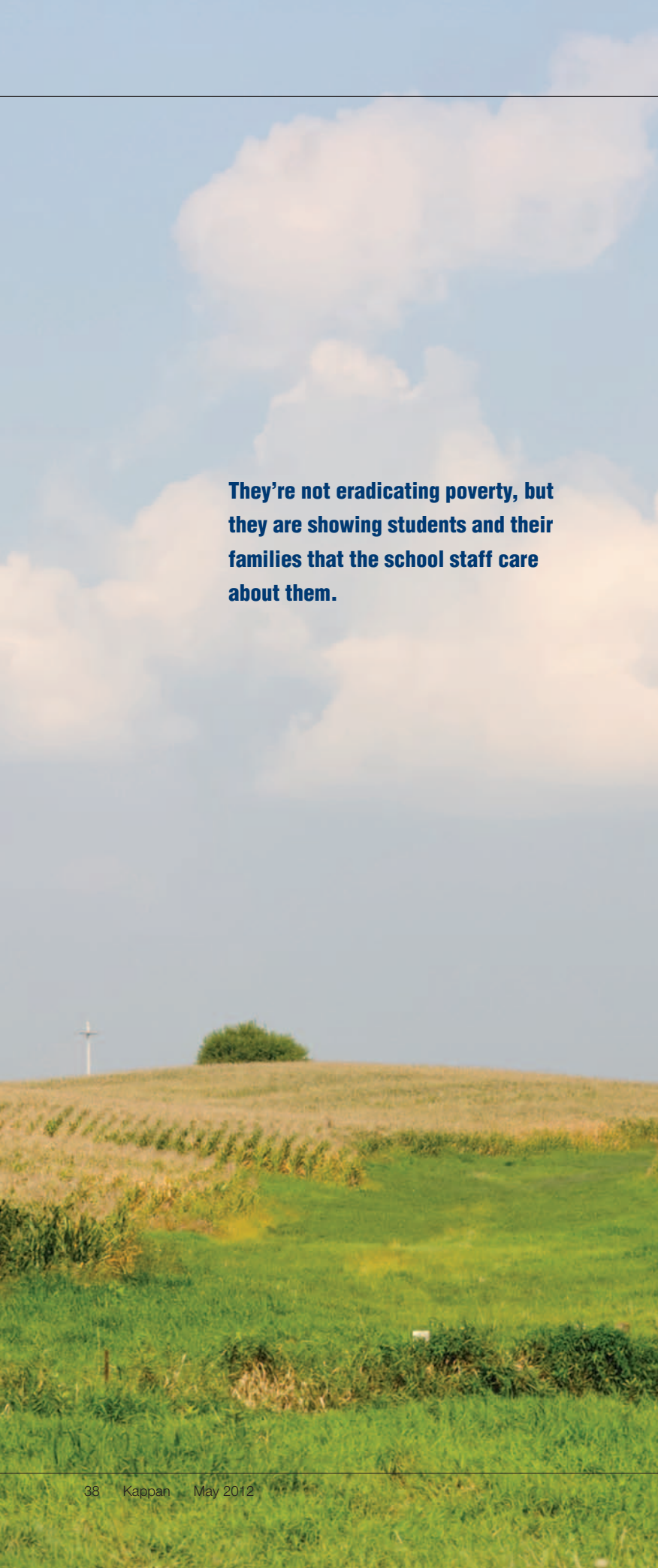
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**They're not eradicating poverty, but they are showing students and their families that the school staff care about them.**

ways. The local radio station runs announcements about the fundraiser, and the *Boone News Republican*, the local newspaper, features it in stories. For several years, a craftsman named Tom Pietz, now deceased, donated a handmade dollhouse to be raffled off, and another craftsman donates wooden bowls. The hospital donates space for the fundraiser to be held, which provides a central, accessible location to gather outside of school grounds.

When the foundation referred an elementary school student for an eye exam and glasses, the doctor waived the exam fee and supplied the glasses at cost. Similarly, the lawyer who set up the foundation's 501(c)(3) status did so free of charge, and their accountant refuses payment every year. Managers from both Wal-Mart and one of the local Hy-Vee grocery stores have given the foundation many gift cards free of charge.

The foundation has also established relationships with utility companies so the company knows that when the foundation is paying a family's utility bill, a check really will be arriving in the mail.

In addition to its annual fundraiser, the foundation also receives a few thousand dollars in donations each year. The *Des Moines Register* has featured the foundation in articles, which has led to more attention and contributions large and small. Other local charitable foundations, such as the Leonard Good Foundation, Thrivent, and the S.L. Moore Charity Foundation, have made contributions. And on a funnier note, Getschman, who runs the bake sale and coffee shop at the festival, receives dozens of mugs in the mail at school and on her doorstep throughout the year. "It's a good thing I have lots and lots of storage," she said. Some people bring their coffee mugs back to the festival to be refilled each year.

The teacher leaders report receiving lots of personal positive feedback from the community, whether they're buying bus tickets for the foundation or simply shopping at the grocery store. Community members tell them repeatedly how much they appreciate the work that the Boone school staff does for Boone students. And last year Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad, who has a farm near Boone, mentioned the Hope Foundation's work in his inaugural address as an example of "a community that cares."

While the teacher leaders who founded and manage the Hope Foundation are inspirational people, they have said that anyone could do what they have done. This is not the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation with millions of dollars, but a community-based, grassroots, teacher-led effort aimed at making a difference in one small town. Maybe all one needs to get started is a little hope.

