



3YrCelebrate news release3.doc

For Immediate Release

Contact: Kelly Lucas, Community Foundation of South Wood County, 715 423-3863
Connie Loden, Heart of Wisconsin Business & Economic Alliance 715 423-1830

**Community Progress Initiative Celebrates
Three Years - Susan V. Berresford will be Guest Speaker**

Wisconsin Rapids, WI, April 10, 2007 ... Three years ago, the Community Progress Initiative was launched in South Wood County with the mission of creating an innovative, self-reliant and business friendly culture in a vibrant community with a prosperous local economy. In April 2004, programs were announced for residents of Nekoosa, Pittsville, Port Edwards, Rome, Rudolph, Vesper and Wisconsin Rapids/Grand Rapids/Biron areas. Since that time, citizens have embraced the vision and are working to make it a reality.

To celebrate this collective effort, a community-wide celebration is planned for April 17, 2007. All community members are invited to participate. It doesn't matter if you have been involved in the Initiative or not; if you wish to attend and learn more, here are the details:

3rd Year Celebration of the Community Progress Initiative

Date: Tuesday, April 17, 2007

Place: Hotel Mead, 451 East Grand Ave., Wis. Rapids

Time: 5:30 p.m. Cocktails/cash bar

6:15 p.m. Dinner

7:00 p.m. Program

Tickets: \$30 per person

Seating is limited; reservations required in advance

Speaker: Susan V. Berresford, president of Ford Foundation

To reserve: call 715 423-1830

Please join the dinner and program with guest speaker Susan V. Berresford, president of the Ford Foundation. Ms. Berresford was named by Forbes Magazine in 2006 as "one of the most powerful women in the world." This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to hear Ms. Berresford speak in Wisconsin Rapids about a community uniting to 'Make It Happen.'

"Citizens of this community should be extremely proud of what has been accomplished in three short years. Susan Berresford's visit to our community is evidence of this," said Kelly Lucas, president/CEO of Community Foundation of South Wood County. "We are

honored to welcome Ford Foundation president Susan V. Berresford as our distinguished speaker at the Progress Initiative's three-year celebration dinner. She leads the Ford Foundation in accomplishing their goals to strengthen democratic values, reduce poverty and injustice, provide international cooperation, and advance human achievement. They are a world leader in philanthropy, and we are privileged to have them invest in the leadership of our community."

"Ford Foundation's support of the Community Progress Initiative is making a tremendous impact across several programming areas such as regional and international study tours that provide experiential learning of best practices, and the Advanced Leadership Institute training that teaches skills in managing change, conflict resolution, strategic leadership, and communication," said Connie Loden, executive director of Heart of Wisconsin Business & Economic Alliance.

*The **Ford Foundation** is an independent, nonprofit grant-making organization with assets over \$11 billion. For more than half a century it has been a resource for innovative people and institutions worldwide, guided by its goal of strengthening democratic values, reducing poverty and injustice, promoting international cooperation, and advancing human achievement. With headquarters in New York, the foundation has office in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Latin America and Russia.*

***Community Progress Initiative** is a grass-roots effort designed to address the economic impact of the changing economy in the South Wood County, WI area. The objective of the Initiative is to create an innovative, self-reliant and business friendly culture in a vibrant community with a prosperous local economy. Launched in April 2004, thousands of citizens from South Wood County and Rome, WI have participated in programming offered in two focus areas: 'Building a Strong and Positive Community,' and 'Creating a Business Friendly Culture.'*

***The Community Progress Initiative** has been recognized internationally as a model in community economic development by the:*

- Community Development Society as the 2006 Innovative Project;*
- Small Business Administration as one of 19 Best Practice examples, and*
- Wisconsin Rural Partners Top Rural Development Initiative.*

Additional information may be found at www.progressinitiative.com.

-end-

Attachment: See recent article published by international ***Chronicle of Philanthropy***.
"Washington-Area Donors Support Struggling Wisconsin Towns" Feb. 22, 2007
--- an *interview with supporters of the Community Progress Initiative*

Reprinted from:
THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

Washington-Area Donors Support Struggling Wisconsin Towns

By Nicole Wallace, The Chronicle of Philanthropy, February 22, 2007

<http://www.philanthropy.com/free/articles/v19/i09/09001901.htm>

Most of Gilbert D. and Jaylee M. Mead's giving is in the arts. Just last year, the couple pledged \$35-million to a Washington theater. But their love of music and performing arts also proved to be the genesis of a very different type of giving: helping to spur economic development in the region where their fortune was made.

Seven years ago, the couple was in Wisconsin Rapids, Wis., to attend the annual meeting of Consolidated Papers, the company that Mr. Mead's grandfather founded there in 1894, and they decided to attend the annual meeting of the Community Foundation of South Wood County, which took place the day before.

One project, in particular, piqued the couple's interest — a new community performing-arts center at the local high school.

When the Meads heard that the recently completed facility didn't have a performance-quality piano, they offered to buy a grand piano — and to send a small group from the school to the Steinway showroom in New York to select the instrument for the new arts center.

From that first introduction, the Meads' relationship with the community foundation grew. In 2004, the couple, together with Ruth B. and Hartley B. Barker, Mr. Mead's cousin and her husband, who live in Scottsdale, Ariz., set up a \$3.1-million fund at the foundation to help the region grapple with the significant economic challenges it faces.

The fund provided critical start-up money to a leadership and business-development project that is encouraging local residents to imagine — and participate in — shaping the region's future.

A Double Bind

For generations, Wisconsin Rapids had been a comfortable, even prosperous, company town.

"The paper industry paid well, whether you were in middle management or the ranks of labor," says Fred Siemers, executive vice president of River Cities Bank, in Wisconsin Rapids. "Things kind of took care of themselves here."

But when Consolidated Papers was sold in 2000 and changes in the global paper industry led to widespread layoffs, Wisconsin Rapids and the surrounding villages were in a double bind, says Kelly Lucas, chief executive officer of the Community Foundation of South Wood County.

Not only was the region reeling from the job losses, she says, but it also faced the consequences of depending for so long on one company and its executives for civic leadership.

"We had not done a good job of cultivating, educating, creating new leaders," says Ms. Lucas. "So in a short period of time, we had a vacuum of leadership, and we had a community that had always looked to our future as defined by Consolidated Papers."

So three years ago, with money from the Barker Mead Fund, the community foundation and Heart of Wisconsin Business & Economic Alliance started the Community Progress Initiative. The project's goal is to create a more vibrant, entrepreneurial business culture, foster civic leadership, and encourage residents to get more involved in civic affairs.

Last February, the Ford Foundation, in New York, awarded a \$240,000 grant to the Community Progress Initiative, and announced an additional, two-year grant of \$500,000 last month. The project has also won state and federal dollars.

"All of that happened because the Barkers and the Meads were willing to be the early investors, and say, 'Yes, we believe this community has the capacity to reinvent itself, to thrive and grow,'" says Ms. Lucas.

'Where Our Roots Are'

Wisconsin Rapids has always been home, says Mrs. Barker, who notes that she and her husband plan to be buried there.

"It's where our roots are," she says. "I didn't want to see it just disintegrate."

Local residents involved in the Community Progress Initiative say that by and large, there is little ill will against the Barkers and the Meads because of the sale of the company. Some note that because of global competition, the layoffs probably still would have been necessary, even if the family had retained control. Most people in the area, they say, are grateful that the couples chose to get involved.

"They certainly wouldn't have had to do it," says Mr. Siemers, of the River Cities Bank. "No one would have criticized them if they had not."

Mr. Mead, who says he opposed his family's sale of the company, joined the community foundation's board of directors three years ago and has taken a personal interest in the economic-development project. When organizers were still trying to figure out exactly what the initiative would entail, a small group went to visit a rural revitalization project in

Omaha. Ms. Lucas recalls that she mentioned the trip briefly in a telephone call with Mr. Mead.

"But much to our surprise," she says, "when we arrived in Nebraska, Gilbert flew in that evening and spent two days with us."

The Meads and the Barkers have also provided financial support to the foundation, which has allowed it to add employees, increase professional-development training, and create a resource center for nonprofit organizations. The couples also paid for the renovation of the foundation's building, which Mr. Mead had purchased and is leaving to the foundation in his will.

Changing the outlook of the people in Wisconsin Rapids and the surrounding towns is a tall order, say people who are participating in the Community Progress Initiative. But they also say they are beginning to see signs of a shift.

Local business leaders and other residents are meeting with people in their own industries to identify and pursue economic-development opportunities in agriculture, telecommunications, tourism, and other areas.

A Business Boot Camp

The group focused on promoting the creation of new small businesses has started a four-day training program, Entrepreneurial Boot Camp, for people who are thinking about starting a new business. The sessions are available several times a year.

Before the Community Progress Initiative, for every 100 people who requested information from the Heart of Wisconsin Business & Economic Alliance about starting a new business, only five actually did. But nearly half of the 100 people who have been through Entrepreneurial Boot Camp so far have gone on to start a new venture.

To promote community-improvement projects — and to encourage local leadership in carrying out those projects — the initiative set up funds in Wisconsin Rapids and six surrounding communities.

The Barker Mead Fund gave each fund \$5,000 for grant making in 2005, and then in 2006 issued a fund-raising challenge to the committees overseeing the funds. If they could raise \$20,000 for endowment by the end of the year, the Barker Mead Fund would contribute an equal sum.

Six funds met the target, largely through grass-roots fund raising. For Vesper, population 540, that meant a letter-writing campaign, a plant sale, rummage sales, and an outdoor party. A steak dinner on New Year's Eve — volunteer firefighters grilled outside in the frosty Wisconsin night — finally put Vesper over the \$20,000 mark.

The ties that were forged or strengthened by people working together to raise the money might be just as important as the money itself, according to Ruth Cline, chairwoman of the Vesper Progress Fund committee.

"I saw a lot of collaboration between groups, like the fire department and the library or the fire department and the churches and the Lions group," she says.

The changes in the business culture and in people's thinking that the Community Progress Initiative is trying to bring about will take many years, but residents are taking steps in the right direction, says Dale Arendt, a volunteer with the initiative who runs a consulting business in Nekoosa, Wis.

"We have begun taking ownership of creating our future," he says, "as opposed to passively sitting back and watching a thriving community have a slow death."

~~end~~~