



**Mardag
Foundation**

50 Years



*From rather humble beginnings,
the Mardag Foundation has
assisted 1,104 organizations,
made 3,035 grants
and contributed more than
\$69 million (through 2018)
to help Minnesotans.*



Introduction

Sarah, a Sudanese woman who lost her husband and son in her war-torn country, found a home in Mankato with the help of the staff of VINE Adult Community Center. Sarah tearfully describes how the staff members at VINE have become her family.

In Proctor, a high school student and a senior citizen became fast friends through the Northland Foundation's AGE to age program. Fourteen of the high school students, with the support of their senior friends, went on to become the first college students in their families.

A baby adopted by a Minnesota family in the aftermath of an earthquake in Guatemala is now a friend and supporter of EVOLVE Adoption and Family Services in Stillwater, which arranged her adoption some 42 years ago.

In Saint Paul, the Rondo Community Land Trust is heading a development to provide housing for seniors and bring back African American small businesses to the historic Rondo neighborhood.

Artists in Hastings are finding a sense of security, safety and creativity at a new 37-unit artists' lofts complex developed by Artspace.

A young man kicked out of his home in greater Minnesota found safe housing in the Twin Cities through Tubman, based in Maplewood.

All of these East Metro and greater Minnesota organizations are living out the vision of Agnes Ober, whose will created the Ober Charitable Foundation upon her death in 1969. Later renamed the Mardag Foundation, the organization has been supporting at-risk families, seniors, community development and the arts in both the East Metro and greater Minnesota for 50 years.

It is a story of quiet generosity, compassionate giving and trying to make a positive difference in the lives of Minnesotans.





Agnes Ober and the Family History

Agnes Dagmar Maas was born in Saint Paul on June 16, 1887, the daughter of two German immigrants. Her mother died when she was six. Her father eventually re-married to a widow with several children. Her new family struggled financially, and Agnes was adopted at nine by James Elmer and his wife, Katharine Gilman, an affluent Saint Paul couple who had no children.

In 1910, at age 20, Agnes left a nursing program in New York to return to Saint Paul to marry Edgar Buchanan Ober, a businessman and friend of her father's. Edgar had been an early investor in Minnesota Mining of Two Harbors, later to become the legendary 3M Company. He eventually became company President.

The Obers had four children: Edgar, Jr.; James, who died in childhood; Katherine; and Stephen, who would become the principal force behind his mother's creation of the Ober Charitable Foundation.

Agnes and Edgar were involved in the community throughout their lives. For years, Edgar was on the board of the Union Gospel Mission, which developed a plan for a boys' club to offer youth a positive alternative to

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Left. Agnes Dagmar Ober with (left to right) Stephen, Katherine, and Edgar Jr. Ober.

hanging out on the streets. Agnes was a long-time community volunteer serving on the boards of United Charities, now known as Family Service, and Protestant Home, the longest serving home for elderly adults in the state.

With the help of her son Steve and the family attorney, Agnes drew up her will in 1965. It created the Ober Charitable Foundation upon her death at 89 in 1969. The Foundation was to reflect her life's work, specifying that Foundation activities be confined to Minnesota and be used exclusively for religious, charitable, scientific, literary and educational purposes. She had directed that the Foundation support "the charitable purposes in which I have always been especially interested" including medical research and the health and welfare of children and the elderly.

The Foundation name was changed in 1976 to "Mardag Foundation," the flipped order of Agnes' middle name, Dagmar, a decision intended to signify a move away from identification with a principal donor. However, it would not be until 1992 that the Foundation would officially incorporate and the original Trust would dissolve. Still there was no doubt that Agnes' life and vision would continue to influence the work of the foundation.

Her grandson Tim Ober, the current board president, explained:

"One of the most wonderful gifts that grandmother gave us in the creation of the Foundation was the foresight to realize times change and we will need to go in new directions. The original trust agreement that created the first charitable trust in 1969 was worded so that we could one, change the trust into an actual charitable foundation, and two, she gave us the leeway then to select from a wide variety of interests.

"What grandmother gave to us was the ability to look at the organizations she was most closely aligned with and the ones where she spent her time volunteering and then use those as the basis of where we wanted to focus our giving areas. Things like working with seniors and working with children. Those organizations she was very much involved with, those are areas we want to focus on and continue the legacy she gave us."

John Couchman, a former vice president at the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation, explained why Agnes' foresight was so important in the creation and development of Mardag.

"What she did was really lay out the mission, the vision, the principles, the values, but also gave permission to future generations to use their judgement to determine the specific ways to address those issues going forward," Couchman said.

"Agnes Ober was a woman before her time," said Ann Mulholland, executive vice president at the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundations. "She was a visionary when she put together the trust document giving future generations the ability to respond to the needs of the day and to make the changes they saw fit. It was remarkable on Agnes' part, and I think the Mardag Foundation was so fortunate to have had that guidance early on."

Gretchen Davidson, who is married to Jed, another grandson and former board member, grew up next door to Jed's family and has vivid memories of Agnes.

"I recall how very interested she was in music and education and how she felt strongly about directing her grandchildren and having them become interested in the things that she was interested in," Gretchen, a current board member, said. "She was very kind. I think that she felt that her family was well taken care of and that the amount of money that she had amassed through the years could be used for helping other people."

Jed added: "I know that the last few years she was alive, when Gretchen and I would visit her she'd already informed us she was going to do this, and the care for children, the elderly and education were the three big things that she had been supporting in various ways. We got the word regularly 'don't forget that,'" Jed said.

Agnes' personality and interests made a strong impression on her family.

"She had a great sense of humor," said Tim Ober, who was 12 when Agnes died. "I remember her telling jokes at the dinner table. She just seemed



“Agnes Ober was a woman before her time. She was a visionary when she put together the trust document giving future generations the ability to respond to the needs of the day and to make the changes they saw fit.”

– Ann Mulholland

to be a very wonderful woman.” He also recalled that she was a voracious reader who loved mysteries. “The family den at her house was filled with books. She was a big fan of Agatha Christie and loved to read those types of stories.

“What I recall most of all is the anecdotes my father shared about growing up in the household,” Tim continued. “He often told stories about Saturday afternoons when the Met Opera broadcast was on. Apparently, you simply did not interrupt grandmother when she was listening to the Met Opera. If there was something happening, a family emergency or the like, unless you were bleeding to death, you just sucked it up and waited until the broadcast was over.”

If it was Agnes’ vision that helped with the creation of the Mardag Foundation, it was her son Steve’s drive and energy that made it a reality.

“Steve Ober had a remarkable sense of humor,” said Gayle Ober, his daughter-in-law, and a former board member. “He was the pun king, he liked to find light in all things, quite a laugh when he got going and really cared a lot about the community in which we lived. I believe one of the reasons the Mardag Foundation was established was his belief the community could do a great job with the funds that might come from a foundation like this.

“Steve really encouraged us to think,” Gayle continued. “He was an educator in the core of his soul, and would sit in board meetings and wait as everyone talked about the subject at hand or gave their opinions. Then he’d take a breath and deliver — zinger is a negative word — but deliver the real focal point of the conversation around which we hadn’t really come to an agreement. He was a great listener, he encouraged us to listen, and he encouraged us to ask deep questions. He also encouraged us (trustees) to think for ourselves.”

Gayle explained that Steve hoped the Foundation “would have an impact on our own lives. He wanted the community to benefit from the Foundation’s existence, not only through the grants we made, but also as an

opportunity for family and community board members to serve and learn. That said, he never wanted the Foundation to take the place of the family's personal philanthropy. "

Steve Ober's passion combined with sound financial judgment made all the difference for the Foundation, according to John Couchman.

"The history of managing the endowment and growing the endowment began immediately with Steve Ober, who was the first principal officer," Couchman said. "He was very careful to pay attention to the investments, to maximize the returns and, at the same time, provide stability for the grantmaking to continue."



How the Foundation Operates

Based on Agnes Ober's vision and history of community service, the Mardag Foundation has several specific areas of focus:

- Improving the lives of at-risk families and children
- Supporting seniors to live independently
- Building the capacity of arts and humanities organizations
- Supporting community development in Saint Paul

The foundation has a geographic focus on the East Metro area and greater Minnesota. Following are examples of the Foundation's contributions and support at work.





Improving the Lives of At-Risk Families and Children

Tubman

Adopted at a young age and a mother of four, Agnes Ober had a special place in her heart for children and families. As a result, the Mardag Foundation has placed a special emphasis on families and children in the East Metro and greater Minnesota.

A shining example of an organization the Foundation has helped is Tubman, formerly known as Family Violence Network, based in Maplewood. Every year, Tubman provides services to 25,000 people who have experienced relationship violence, sexual assault or exploitation, mental health challenges, addiction, homelessness and any kind of trauma.

“The services we provide are really about helping people thrive, helping relationships be healthy and communities be peaceful,” explained Jennifer Polzin, CEO at Tubman.

The Mardag Foundation has partnered with Tubman since the late 1990s. “They are a thinking partner, they are a generous investor in our work,

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Left: Youth at Tubman’s transitional housing.

and they help us figure out how we can best be responsive to the needs we see in the East Metro community,” Polzin said.

Mardag was one of the startup funders for Tubman’s Safe Journeys program, which opened in August of 2015, for youth and young adults at risk of violence or who have experienced sexual exploitation and trafficking.

“That single investment helped that program so that in its first three years we’ve served 155 youth who are parents to 32 children,” Polzin said. “That funding was especially significant because it allowed us to leverage that investment and go to government partners and show that this is a private-public community partnership that is an investment to serve youth who are victims of trafficking.”

Polzin said that Mardag Foundation staff and board members “understand the interconnectedness of the issues, and that people experiencing violence may also be struggling with addiction or be struggling to maintain their recovery or sobriety.”

Working together with Mardag Foundation, Tubman has made a tremendous impact in the community.

“Hundreds of families have received shelter after experiencing domestic violence and finding themselves homeless with no places to go,” Polzin said. “Tens of thousands have made plans to better respond to their safety issues as they’re living in the community. They’ve received legal remedy orders for protection. They’ve had the opportunity to address the trauma through mental health services and get support both for themselves and their children.

“Hundreds of people who have used violence have participated in our holistic treatment program for offenders of violence. After a year, over 93 percent have not committed another act of violence,” Polzin explained. “Hundreds have received support and safe shelter and housing. Youth, and in many cases their children if they’re parenting, have received a safe place to go and other support so they can achieve their goals.”



Tubman Day on the Hill.

The numbers tell an important story about the impact of a program like Tubman. But sometimes the comments of former clients who were helped tell an even more powerful story.

“It is truly amazing what you hear from people and sometimes it’s just a simple thank you in that moment that really helps keep staff motivated and inspired. We get to be part of something that is so life changing and meaningful and not many people get to say that,” Polzin said. “Sometimes they come back and want to volunteer. Other times they reach out to me in public. I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve been out at the grocery store or I’ll be making a presentation to a faith group or in a workplace and inevitably one person or two people — sometimes as many as ten people — will come up to me and tell me I’m part of an organization that once helped them or someone they care about.”

“I’ll often hear stories about how Tubman helped them in their darkest hour — it may have been years ago, or it may have been weeks ago or even days ago — or we helped their daughter or nephew or colleague at work.”



✕ From the Streets to Community College ✕

Jeremiah, who was living in greater Minnesota, was kicked out of his home by his family, was struggling and eventually found his way to Saint Paul. He bounced around from friend to friend. He was hanging out at the bus station and met someone he thought was a good Samaritan who gave him a place to stay. But it became clear that he was asked to trade sex for the housing. He thought of the person as his boyfriend, but he ended up being sold for sex and forced to stay with the man against his will.

He found out about Tubman's Safe Journeys program through another young person whom he met when he was at the Mall of America. This young person told him she had found help at Tubman East — so he showed up at the Safe Journeys program and said he wasn't sure what he needed.

At first, he didn't say he had been trafficked, but just said he was looking for resources. He started coming to the program, dropping in for a shower, someone to talk with, doing a little laundry, getting other resources and then would go on his way.

He started staying at Safe Journeys' shelter. He has been there for about a year and a half — young people can stay for up to two years. During that time, he has graduated from high school, has made other friends in the community, is volunteering and is enjoying his first few semesters at community college, all because he was able to find that help through his informal network, both female and male friends, who themselves had found help at Tubman.

EVOLVE

LaShonda, a school bus driver and single mom of three teenagers, was in the process a few years ago of adopting a little boy who rode her school bus. She discovered he had three half-siblings in another county, siblings he didn't know about. She opened her heart and her home to the siblings and ended up with a family of seven, four of whom were under age six.

"I was personally there on adoption day (two years later) and it was so special," said Nicole Deters, chief executive officer of EVOLVE Adoption and Family Services in Stillwater. "It was one big, happy family. It was so amazing. And to know that these children, especially the little ones, got reunited with a half-sibling they didn't even know they had, and that they truly have brothers and sisters and a loving home, is so special."

These are the stories that Deters and her colleagues at EVOLVE never tire of telling over and over because each story is about the joy of helping families whether through adoption or foster care or support services.

"Mardag Foundation has supported EVOLVE for many years both for capital and programming needs. Hundreds of children a year are impacted by EVOLVE's programs," Deters said. "And it's the kind of program that would be close to the heart of Agnes Ober, the founder of the Mardag Foundation who was adopted as a young girl after her mother died," Deters recalled.

"Their belief in our pioneering and innovative services, their willingness to take the risk with us as an agency and kind of step outside the box has really helped us grow and helped us meet the unique needs of our community," Deters explained. "So, it's been a great partnership and I am just so happy for the relationship."

Programming support in recent years has been focused on foster care development.

"There was an agency that had been around for many years that was closing its doors and asked us if we would be willing to take on their



The Naser Family and their children, both adopted through EVOLVE.

programming of foster care and adoption,” Deters explained. “And we said, ‘Of course.’”

She said it has become the largest program at EVOLVE. “And we are the largest private licensing entity of relative kinship families in the state. And it is all due to the funding from Mardag Foundation that began back in 2014.” Deters explained that the need for foster care in the state is great:

“The county reaches out to us saying ‘We have a child; we need a home for him.’ We try to match the right family with the right child. The child has already experienced a lot of trauma. So, there is a matching process, but it’s also an emergency process. The child needs a place today, not tomorrow or the next day.”

She said that in relative kinship placements, the child experiences less trauma when placed in the home of a relative or kin. The need then becomes to



Rob and Matt with their daughter, adopted through EVOLVE.

try to license the home as quickly as possible, “get family support in place, make sure the family has everything they need to be successful in raising their niece, grandchild, nephew or cousin,” Deters said.

Sometimes the most basic help makes a huge difference in the lives of children in the foster care system.

Deters tells the story of an aunt with two of her own children who suddenly took on five nieces and nephews when her sister ended up in the child protection system.

EVOLVE stepped in to buy beds, linens and brand-new pillows for the foster kids.

“It was really a neat thing,” Deters recalled. “When the older children were at school, the little ones were still at home and over-the-top excited and enthusiastic about their bedding and to hear them say: ‘This is mine, really,



✕ A Baby Found in the Rubble of an Earthquake ✕ Finds a Home in Minnesota

Some 42 years ago, a small baby was found in a pile of rubble following an earthquake in Guatemala. Her mother could not be located. A founding board member of EVOLVE received a call asking whether the family was interested in adopting the baby. The family said yes. She was one of the first children adopted through EVOLVE.

All these years later she is a good friend of Nicole Deters, the CEO of EVOLVE, and is active in the organization. Another example of how the good works of the agency have come full circle.

this is mine?’ That was a pretty neat experience.” The kids spent 14 months with their aunt before they were reunited with their mother.

Deters, who has been at EVOLVE since 2012, is grateful for the impact the agency, with help from the Mardag Foundation, has had on the people it serves.

“Whether they’re adults now, or they’re in our care or currently impacted by our programs, it is amazing to see the child bloom or thrive as an adult,” she said. “I feel I have an extended family of adoptees, adoptive parents, foster parents. My relationships in my own personal community have grown so much through EVOLVE that I just can’t imagine it any other way and I just feel so blessed.”



"I really get to spend some time with these kids. We get to have great relationships with them, with their families. We find out all about them, we try to do everything we can to make our program be individualized for each child, especially at this age."

– Nancie Deming

Kickstart Day Care in Two Harbors Northland Foundation

Five days a week from 6:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., 70 children, from infants to kids getting ready for kindergarten, spend their day in a bright, modern, safe learning environment at the Kickstart Preschool in Two Harbors, 30 miles north of Duluth.

The rooms filled with happy, inquisitive kids are the result of support from the Mardag Foundation, and its northern Minnesota collaborator, the Northland Foundation, located in Duluth and serving the seven northeastern Minnesota counties.

"We would not be here if it weren't for the Northland Foundation," said Deb Archer, who runs Kickstart. "When we initially purchased the building, Northland came in, and because they're such big supporters of early childhood, they ended up taking on a third of our mortgage so we could actually purchase the property. And then, just because we have such a great relationship with them, they told us about the \$50,000 grant (from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development) in order to expand. So, they worked with us to access that grant."

Northland's Parent Aware Pathways Initiative, jointly funded by Northland and the Mardag Foundation, provided additional workshops and training in the State of Minnesota's Parent Aware program for Kickstart's teachers. The training of the staff has led to a top-ranked four-star Parent Aware rating for the center. That rating in turn allows the center to take in at-risk kids who qualify for state scholarships.

"We have kids that are in foster care, kids that their home lives are just a challenge for them," Archer explained. "Because we can offer the scholarships, we are able to serve a lot more families facing difficult issues, too."

Archer praised her teachers for creating a "great learning environment" for the kids at the center. "The teachers do a phenomenal job; they all turn in lesson plans."

Nancie Deming is one of those teachers.

“I love being the teacher here,” she said. “I really get to spend some time with these kids. We get to have great relationships with them, with their families. We find out all about them, we try to do everything we can to make our program be individualized for each child, especially at this age. It’s been fun.”

Deming said that “everywhere I go in the center, I see kids that I know. I’m pretty much a rock star, we all are as teachers here. You get your self-esteem built. You come in, and it’s like, ‘Teacher Nancie! High five!’ So, it’s awesome to be able to spend that time with the kids. My kids are grown and all adults now, so I’m able to just invest into the future generations of the children around us. I love it.”

Through Northland’s Parent Aware Pathways Initiative, child care centers in seven northeastern Minnesota counties, as well as the teachers at Kick-start, have benefitted from training in the Parent Aware system.

“It was critical in our ability to truly reach out to all seven counties, to offer the trainings throughout our region, to be able to offer additional resources and support for child care providers,” said Lynn Haglin, vice president of Northland and KIDS PLUS director. “It built our connection to providers and has helped really establish trust.”

She said that Northland’s region now has one of the highest percentages of providers in the state on board with the Parent Aware rating system. “We are at about 25 percent of providers who have engaged with Parent Aware and have achieved a one, two, three, or four-star rating. We have about 32 percent who are in the process of achieving their rating,” Haglin said.

She pointed to child care providers who “were tired and experiencing burnout. They didn’t have the access to the kind of training they wanted, and they were not feeling as though they were recognized as professionals.” Many have said they “stayed in business because of the Parent Aware Pathways Initiative and the opportunities that have been offered to them over the past five years.”



✧ AGE to age: Where Seniors help Students and Vice Versa ✧

In an AGE to age program, created by the Northland Foundation in 16 communities in the region, middle and high school students and seniors closed the generation gap. Thirty seniors and younger people participated in many activities together in a program in Proctor and developed close bonds. In one case, a 10th grade girl and one of the senior men developed a friendship while shopping.

“They always told the story afterwards that there’s where they really found an interest in each other,” recalled Lynn Haglin, vice president of the Northland Foundation. “They went to the Dollar Store and they kind of laughed their way through the shopping trip and from that point on, they were such good friends.”

With the help and support of the seniors, all 14 of the students went on to apply for college, the first people in their families to do so. “They didn’t really believe that college was something for them, but these older adults were committed to help them with applications and whatever else it took to realize that college was an option,” Haglin recalled.

“Connecting generations can have a powerful impact on the lives of the young people, as well as on the older adults, by providing purpose and meaningful activity for both generations,” Haglin said.



Kids learning through Kickstart.

Hundreds of child care providers have embraced the opportunities that Northland has been able to offer because of the Mardag Foundation's funding, Haglin said.

"It has been incredible to hear from providers who truly feel this has given them new life and enthusiasm for their work, and, of course, opportunities to gain skills, knowledge, and have additional strategies for working with children," she said.

"And Kickstart has been one of the leaders in seeking Parent Aware training," Haglin said. "They are committed to offering quality care for children in their center.

"Kickstart is a wonderful example of child care providers who understand why they want that additional training," she explained. "Training to



A Kickstart teacher with her students.

achieve a Parent Aware star rating is over and above. This is not required by licensing; it's a voluntary program, but providers know by building their own skills, they can provide a higher quality and stronger, more developmentally appropriate setting for young children."

Beyond training for child care providers to achieve their star rating, Haglin said, the Mardag Foundation has helped the Northland Foundation serve people throughout the seven counties and the three tribal nations in northeastern Minnesota.

"The Mardag Foundation has helped us support community members of all ages from the youngest to the oldest in our rural region," Haglin said.

"They have been a strong partner with the Northland Foundation over the years and helped us to make a difference in the lives of many people living in our region."

Supporting Older Adults to Live Independently

VINE Faith in Action, Mankato

For 24 years, VINE Faith in Action has served the older adults in Mankato and Blue Earth County. Five years ago, an old, rundown building that was once part of Minnesota State University-Mankato was slated for destruction. Instead, the county commissioners agreed to sell it to VINE for \$1, provided VINE could raise \$1.7 million to restore and renovate the five-story, 60,000 square foot building.

Pam Determan, VINE's executive director and founding director, reached out to the Mardag Foundation for help. It was the beginning of a great partnership.

"I think you only need to look around the VINE Adult Community Center to see that there's 1,700 adults who regularly come here to exercise, to socialize, to engage in lifelong learning, reminiscing and groups like that," Determan said. "With the Foundation's belief in the work that we do, last year we served almost another 1,700 people living in the community with

Left: Building Community with VINE Faith in Action.

basic chores and services including raking, shoveling, transportation and meals on wheels that help them to maintain their independence.”

Everywhere you look at the VINE Community Center, older adults are exercising, swimming, playing pool, learning English, learning how to write journals, playing instruments, walking or running around a track and socializing, always socializing.

Determan said that “Mardag Foundation has been a significant friend and partner to us. I say the word friend because I truly mean it. They are easy to work with, they understand visions.”

Determan said that “Agnes Ober would be very proud of seeing how the resources that she provided is helping VINE and many other places help aging adults live healthy and productive lives.”

Another program the Foundation has supported is called The Good Neighbor Project, Determan said. “As people age, undoubtedly, we experience a lot of losses,” she said. “People lose loved ones, they may lose their vision, their hearing declines, their social connections, their kids may move across the country. And more so than ever we are learning the importance of providing ways for people who are isolated or alone to connect with others.”

And a third program helped by the Foundation that began a few years ago was an attempt to reach out to older adults from different cultural backgrounds in the area. The success of the program surprised Determan and her colleague, Julie Hawker, the diversity coordinator at VINE.

“At first, we were wondering, ‘Are we going to find 30 older people from communities of color right here in Mankato?’” Hawker said. “As of today, we have 175 coming from 21 different countries.”

A major feature of the Kindred Gathering Adult Day Program is that the focus is on both socialization and then education, Hawker explained.

“When the students come to school, at the beginning of the day, they will have tea time and then socialization and then they’ll come into the



“Mardag Foundation has been a significant friend and partner to us, and I say the word friend because I truly mean it. They were easy to work with, they understand visions.”

– Pam Determan



✕ Sarah: “You Are My Family” ✕

Sarah, a Christian woman from South Sudan, is a participant in VINE’s program to work with seniors from diverse communities. At a gathering last November at Julie Hawker’s home, Sahara told her story and what she was thankful for.

She described how she had witnessed her husband and son shot to death in front of her in war-torn South Sudan. She was also injured. She went to a refugee camp where she was all alone and then came to the United States and eventually to Mankato, where she was still alone.

And then she found VINE’s Kindred Gathering Adult Aid Program.

“I love the United States a lot,” Sarah said. “I love you guys. You are my family,” she told Hawker. She explained how she appreciates the classes, the exercise and what Hawker and other staff have done to help her.

“All the people together, standing together, sitting together. We love Julie, we love all of you people,” Sarah said.

Hawker responded, “You have come a long way. You are very strong. You belong here with us. You are part of our family.”

As Hawker spoke to Sarah, she leaned in to hug Hawker with tears in her eyes.



Kindred Gathering Adult Day Program participant.

classroom and there’s warm welcomes,” Hawker said. “There’s hugs that take place, and they’re paired up with a learning partner or a tutor. And they have a journal and the journal has been filled out by the coordinator on the topics that are going to be covered that day. They spend an hour and a half studying English during that time. Then at the end, the learning partner or the tutor takes the time to leave a little note for the coordinator to understand what they were able to cover that day and also, what are some interests or struggles that the elder may have had in class that day.”

Hawker pointed out that many of the instructors are former teachers who work with the seniors both inside and outside the classroom.

“For instance, we have three retired teachers who are taking turns being a learning partner or a tutor for a teacher from Vietnam,” she said. “When



Aqua yoga at VINE Adult Community Center.

you see them together, many times they're looking at family photos or they are doing Google searches on a specific topic that they want to talk about that day. The Vietnamese teacher, her whole goal was to learn how to read and write and have conversational English right here in the United States. It's learning at its best."

Even Mardag Foundation board members volunteer at VINE. "I've had the good luck to volunteer there and work at the literacy center with some of the elder Somali women who have settled in Mankato," said Cornelia Eberhart, a former long-time board member and granddaughter of Agnes Ober. "I think we're one of the few organizations that work with Somali elders. There are a lot of people working with kids helping them adapt and learn language, but the elders were a little bit neglected, so it was wonderful when VINE stepped in. They provide respite care for people who have

partners with Alzheimer's and rides for people with no transportation. It's a wonderful place."

That day-to-day interaction between staff and the older adults who participate in VINE's daily activities is the essence of VINE's work.

"To look at each person who's coming through the door of our building or each person that we deliver a hot meal to, or we give a ride to is somebody whose life we can brighten just a little bit," Determan said. "Our name is VINE Faith in Action, but we don't work specifically with any religious denomination or any congregation. We have staff from many different cultures. But I think what we all have in common is the knowing that we are here to make life easier for people who are challenged by many, many different things."



Building the Capacity of Arts and Humanities Organizations

Springboard for the Arts

While the Mardag Foundation has supported many major arts and humanities institutions over the years, perhaps its most significant and meaningful work has been its support of smaller arts organizations.

“Where I think they’ve had pretty meaningful impact is engaging with small arts organizations throughout the state of Minnesota and helping them launch,” explained Ann Mulholland, executive vice president of the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation. “As we know, arts are a rich part of our community and really help our community in a number of ways. I think the Mardag Foundation’s focus on building the capacity of arts and humanities organizations throughout the state has been profound.”

A perfect example is Springboard for the Arts, with offices in Saint Paul and Fergus Falls, a recipient of the Mardag Foundation’s support of various projects for about 20 years.

Left: Kelle Jolly performs at the 2017 RAC Summit. Photo credit Holly Diestler.

“Our work is all about connecting artists and their communities, supporting artists directly to be able to make a living and life and supporting communities to be able to access creativity and culture more fully,” said Laura Zabel, Springboard’s executive director for the past 14 years.

With the Foundation’s help, Springboard opened an office in Fergus Falls eight years ago, conducted a major research project on the value of art and culture and community health and is in the process of converting a used car dealership on University Avenue into its new arts headquarters named Springbox.

“I think that’s a really special part of the Mardag Foundation, that they trust us enough to know our community’s needs and to be able to support us to grow and change and evolve and be responsive to what the community needs,” Zabel said of the Foundation’s support for the arts.

She cited the help for the Fergus Falls office, bringing Springboard’s work to greater Minnesota.

“Mardag was one of the earliest supporters of our rural work, of our office in Fergus Falls, and that really helped us open an office in a rural community, which was a brand-new idea for Springboard,” Zabel explained. “Now, eight years later, that office is really thriving and has become a national leader in community arts and development, has attracted investment both locally and nationally to that community, and all of that is possible because we had this trusted partner.”

Zabel said that the Foundation understands and supports the idea of holistic community health and development.

“I also think the Mardag Foundation is a foundation that has always recognized the role arts and culture has played in community health, and they see arts and culture as an important part of what communities need to be healthy and equitable and successful and for people to have access to opportunity and connection. So, our work is really about that,” Zabel said.



Rendering of Springboard headquarters.

With the Foundation’s help, Springboard has made it possible for artists across the state to be able to access a host of services including career planning, business skills training, career coaching, access to healthcare services, “all the kinds of nuts and bolts basic need services we provide to creative entrepreneurs all across Minnesota,” Zabel explained.

The Foundation also has helped Springboard train artists in community development and community organizing and helped artists contribute to their communities in a lot of different ways, both by being supported themselves, “but then to do projects that really tackle big community issues and help really integrate creative ideas and thinking into some of the biggest challenges communities are dealing with right now,” Zabel added.

The development of a new headquarters space in Saint Paul will enable Springboard's artists to do even more.

"This space on University Avenue is a great example of an investment from the Mardag Foundation in seeing artists as the people who should take on the challenge of vacant property or unused or unloved land," Zabel said. "That artists are people who can look at a 50-car asphalt parking lot and say this should be community green space and space for creativity and culture and connection, that artists can be the ones to see the possibility even in spaces or places that other people have overlooked or sort of written off. So, I think this is exactly how we fulfill our mission and the Foundation is helping us do that right now."

The space on University Avenue will enhance Springboard's local and national training, cross-sector work and be a place that creates economic opportunity for artists and people in the community.

"It will be a demonstration of all of our values and mission in a really physical, literal way, so it feels right and an inspiration to me that the Mardag Foundation has been an early investor in this big community project that represents this really big inflection point for us as an organization," Zabel said.

Right: CSA (Community Supported Art) 2014 pickup. Photo credit Sean Smuda.



"I also think the Mardag Foundation is a foundation that has always recognized the role arts and culture has played in community health..."

– Laura Zabel

Hastings Art Lofts

On the shores of the Mississippi River in the historic part of downtown Hastings sits the Artspace Riverlofts, 37 units ranging from studio apartments to three-bedrooms exclusively for artists. The Artspace mission is to create, foster and preserve affordable housing and spaces for artists and their families.

Funded in part by \$50,000 in grants from the Mardag Foundation, the Riverlofts allow Artspace “to be able to create spaces for artists to live, to work and to focus on their art in a space that is both beautiful and affordable,” says Erica Dani, former Asset Manager at Artspace Projects, Inc.

“The Foundation’s support for the Artspace Hastings Riverlofts has been very important because there are a lot of children and families who live here and part of the Mardag Foundation’s mission is focused on children and at-risk people in art,” Dani explained. “This building has housed people who were formerly homeless. It’s housed people who have Section 8 vouchers. It houses artists and children.”

And the project has also had a major impact on the Hastings community.

“The artists who live in this building have created and curated galleries for the public,” Dani said. “In addition, a lot of the residents have joined community boards and community organizations. It’s been a full circle community involvement experience.”

She said that the artist residents “are really appreciative of the fact that the community spaces are free for them to use and they’re able to focus more on their art and not on how to pay the rent.”

And children of the artists are very much part of the community. A 17-year-old sang at the grand opening. Middle school kids contributed paintings that were on display. And babies are being born and raised at the lofts.

Maria Ramos, a young singer and artist, heard about the loft from friends. A new mother, she found the reasonable rent and the opportunities afforded at the lofts “priceless.”



Artspace Riverlofts.

“We have a really great community here, honestly. They’re family,” Ramos said. “I know I could call them for anything and everything, and they really give me their honest feedback and are very encouraging.”

At last year’s grand opening, she was not planning to participate.

“They convinced me not only to hang some of my artwork and put up some of my ceramic stuff, but they also convinced me to sing during the event several times. So, it was great. I needed that push.”

Dani tells the story about a resident, on the brink of homelessness, who was able to move into the Lofts with a Section 8 Housing voucher the day before she became homeless.

location, and I do a lot of local scenes and paintings around the area between Hastings and Prescott. That's sort of my focus. As well as still lifes and interiors and the restoration work, and I work with 19th century paintings and all kinds of things."

She thinks it's great that the Lofts are on the riverfront and it attracts people to that part of Hastings. "It has to be good for the community."



Gallery space at Artspace Riverlofts.

"It was really special for us at Artspace that we were able to prevent homelessness for a family and the children were able to start school on time," she explained. "They participated in the grand opening. It's really special and wonderful for us to see that happen in our buildings. It's because of the Mardag Foundation's support that this was able to happen."

Connie Mysener, who has a studio at the Lofts, said she was always drawn to Hastings. "I was an antique dealer here and I've taught painting here and I love the historic nature of it and the charm of it and being on the river. It doesn't get much better than that," she said. "This was a great

Supporting Community Development Throughout Saint Paul

Rondo Land Trust Project

At the corner of Selby and Milton, near the historic Rondo community in Saint Paul, sits a new, unique development that combines 34 units of affordable housing for seniors and 9,300 square feet of commercial space for small businesses owned by people of color.

After years of planning and community meetings in an effort to keep seniors and businesses in the neighborhood or draw them back, the Selby-Milton-Victoria Project is now a reality.

“From the first meeting we had with the Mardag Foundation’s staff it was clear they understood what we were trying to accomplish here on Selby and, more importantly, the challenges we faced in getting this project off the ground,” explained Greg Finzell, executive director of Rondo Community Land Trust, which developed the project with help from the Foundation. “This is a challenge in that this is a different model, it’s a new model to create affordable commercial space. They (Mardag Foundation staff)

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Left: Rendering of Selby-Milton-Victoria Project.

understood it from the beginning. They championed it when they got back downtown to present it to the board.”

Finzell said that the popular Golden Thyme Coffee & Cafe will move across the street to the new project as a key tenant and will be joined by In Black Ink, the only African American publishing house in Minnesota, and five other businesses.

“It’s an important contribution both to the community and to the state and we’re proud we’ll be able to serve them when the buildings are complete,” Finzell said.

“Rondo used to be, I would say from the ‘40s to the late ‘50s, a very tight community with thriving businesses and homes, and with the advent of the plan to bring Interstate 94, the freeway through, it caused the demise of Rondo,” said Michael Wright, owner of the Golden Thyme who worked on the new project. “What you see now is fragmented African American businesses and homeowners. What this allows us to do is bring people back into the fold who have been wanting to come back to the Rondo community. This isn’t Rondo community specifically but it’s within an earshot of Rondo, so it means a lot for us to beat the drum of Black entrepreneurship and get folks in who are inspired to be entrepreneurs. I can’t thank the Foundation enough for understanding what we want to do and allowing this opportunity to happen.”

Just as his own business has been a gathering spot and a magnet that pulled people and businesses back to the community, Wright sees the development doing the same thing.

“As I’ve been told by our patrons, Golden Thyme Coffee & Cafe has had a great impact on the community in its almost 19 years in business,” Wright said. “There was a time when people avoided the area like the plague and now they come in droves.”

Wright said the new project will allow his café to have a full kitchen, expand its hours and provide more to the community.



Selby-Milton-Victoria Project nearing completion. April 2019.

And the project will allow seniors “to stay here and grow older gracefully in their community,” Wright said. “The idea is for folks to be able to take voice lessons, join a chorus, learn to play an instrument, learn to spin clay, learn to paint, learn to garden or help one another garden. Seniors come with a lot of knowledge. We need that knowledge and we need it right in our community. It’s a great opportunity to work with our seniors in their golden years. We have some wonderful people from all walks of life. One of the things we want to do is make sure they feel welcome on the inside as well as the outside.”

“The Selby-Milton-Victoria project represents a new way of providing commercial space and affordable senior housing, and it’s a model that hasn’t really been tested here in Minnesota,” Finzell explained. “But we hope once we get it off the ground that other communities will look at this model as a possible way of providing long-term commercial space for small businesses that they either want to keep in their community or that they want to recruit. If we want to have small businesses in places that reflect those communities, then this is the type of project we believe we need in order to carry out those goals.”



Spiritual Uplift and Rewards

For family members, board members and the people who work with the Mardag Foundation in communities across the state, there is a real sense of purpose and fulfillment to the work.

“I think it’s joy. You love to see people fulfilling their potential,” said Cornelia Eberhart, a granddaughter of Agnes Ober and former longtime board member. “I’ve loved being on the Mardag Foundation’s board. It was hard to leave. It’s just so lucky to be able to give money to things that you care about. It was a big part of my life.” She praised her cousin Tim Ober, longtime board president, for encouraging board members to be engaged in the community.

“It changed the way I did it, the way I participated, and I’ll continue to do that even though I’m not on the board,” she said.

For Gretchen Davidson, a longtime board member married to Jed Davidson, a grandson of Agnes, seeing the Foundation money helping all kinds of causes is rewarding.

Left: Engaging young people through AGE to age.

“I particularly appreciate when we get a report back and a particular grantee gives us great details on what they’ve done and how much they appreciate how the funding has helped them,” she said. “That is very encouraging, and it feels very good to be able to help people that way.”

To Gayle Ober, also a longtime board member and wife of Tim Ober, the sense of spirituality “is tied with that reciprocity between the giver and the receiver. A foundation doesn’t have any purpose, at least a family foundation like ours, if we don’t have grantees we can work with to do good in the world. Otherwise it’s a pot of money that sits there,” she said. “From a spiritual standpoint, it brings me great joy, it gives me hope for the world, and I have to believe that we will do good things as we continue into the next 50 years.”

As an example, she referred to WordsWork, a program the Foundation supported from 1999 – 2010 in which the Mardag Foundation joined with the F. R. Bigelow Foundation and the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation, among others, to build reading programs in preschools, particularly among Head Start programs in Ramsey County. Parents, especially those from immigrant families, who had never owned books were able to get books in their homes so they could read to their children.

“I don’t care where you come from or what part of the world or how much money you have, parents want our children to do well and being able to see the effect of that program after almost 15 years was really joyful to us and I think we’d do something like that again in a heartbeat,” Gayle Ober said.

Phyllis Goff is a long-time community board member who has been inspired by the Mardag Foundation’s work over the years.

“I believe that giving to others has an innate spiritual component,” she explained. “And therefore, when you give of yourself, when you give to others, you are demonstrating a part of you that’s spiritual — a part that I think carries on to that next person. I personally feel like I’m uplifted spiritually through my own charitable giving, but also feel it through the



Dan and Eric from Caring Connections, VINE Faith in Action.

work I’ve done with the Mardag Foundation in helping to approve grants and, thus, passing on a kind of spiritual uplift the grantees probably also feel from that experience.”

She added that she is “amazed at the continuous feedback we get about the significance of our involvement in greater Minnesota communities, especially given the smaller size of our foundation and our grantmaking. It’s so gratifying to hear how much people appreciate the impact of Mardag’s focus and commitment.”

John Couchman, who worked with the Mardag Foundation for many years when he was a vice president at the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation, said his spiritual uplift came from seeing how the Mardag’s work could

make such a difference in people's lives. "That was a real reward," he said.

It was all made clear to him on his numerous site visits to the Mardag projects in Saint Paul and around the state. Visiting children at pre-schools, for example.

"Certainly, in the face of the kids, just the enthusiasm for learning," he said. "Young children from disadvantaged backgrounds who did not, perhaps, have access to books and to reading, and to having adults who were in a position to pay a lot of attention to them on a continuing basis just came alive; the joy, the innate intelligence that they expressed was just a tremendous reward."

He had the same response when visiting seniors. "These small senior centers in greater Minnesota where the younger generations were moving out of these towns, these people didn't have resources," he noted. "Through the Foundation's work with senior centers, I was able to see seniors come together, support each other, engage in interpersonal relationships that made their lives continue to be fulfilling and to find the support they needed to live independently, and just the joy that provided them, the satisfaction."

For Tim Ober, a long grantmaking session can sometimes feel overwhelming because of the problems facing the grant applicants and can "seem like a drop in the bucket and that we're really not making a difference. But as my father used to put it, we don't always get to see the actual lives being impacted. It's that type of knowledge to look back on and think about that these grants truly make a difference for an individual somewhere, and that's the really great part of it. There is really a sense of positive impact that you feel."

It all comes alive when board members visit recipients in the field as Ober does. He described a meeting with a young man at a baking company who was a recent immigrant. "This was an opportunity for him to really integrate himself into the community. It was fun to see the spark in his eyes and the enthusiasm in his voice when he talked about his experiences."



"From a spiritual standpoint, it brings me great joy, it gives me hope for the world, and I have to believe that we will do good things as we continue into the next 50 years."

– Gayle Ober

Looking to The Future: The Next 50 Years

Looking ahead to the next 50 years of the Mardag Foundation, family, board members and community members alike expressed optimism that the Foundation will continue to play an important and useful role in the East Metro and across Minnesota. As members of the 4th generation of Agnes Ober's family move onto the board, the leadership torch will be passed, along with a strong commitment to service that began with Agnes.

"I see incredible imagination and creativity," Cornelia Eberhart said of the new generation. "I am so impressed with the sense of possibility that they can do things. They've had different experiences. I think at least a lot of the young people on the board have had quite a number of experiences with service; they have a strong sense of service. I feel inspired by that and I feel appreciative and I love them."

She also noted that the board has brought in community members who have contributed immensely. "We have amazing people that we've brought in. That's been one of the strengths of the Mardag Foundation. We try to bring in people from different communities with different backgrounds,

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Left: Creating high-quality early childhood education with Northland Foundation.

and they've enriched our decision-making immensely. I think it's been the best of all possible situations."

Phyllis Goff echoed those sentiments.

"I'm excited about the energy and the new ideas and perspective that the 4th generation has already been bringing to the Foundation," she said. "It's heartwarming to see them bring a more holistic viewpoint of the interconnectedness of all sectors in our world. Their energy demonstrates how much they care about the community, about our environment and, especially, wanting things better for future generations. There is this strong sense that they want to help make a positive difference, particularly for kids who are at risk and for families who are in need."

Ann Mulholland, executive vice president of the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation, shared Goff's feelings about the 4th generation board members, the most recent of whom started in 2019. "They're thrilled to be a part of it," she said. "Each brings something different, whether they're a teacher, a homemaker or working in the private sector. Each of them brings a little different point of view to the Mardag Foundation. It's exciting."

She hopes and expects the Mardag Foundation will continue to "merge the best of both worlds, being high impact in its philanthropy and also focusing on being open to the community and to new ideas."

Looking 100 years down the road, Goff sees the Foundation "continuing to invest in staple focus areas that have been the hallmarks in Mardag's tradition of giving — the arts, especially arts of small organizations that help to uplift the culture and economy in our communities; helping youth to reach their full potential, especially youth at risk; and working across generations to help seniors continue to live independently as long as they can live safely. Finally, I see the great, great, great grandchildren of the Ober family actively involved not only in the community, but also actively involved on the board in continuing the important legacy of their ancestor and the foundation's founder, Agnes Ober."



"Their energy demonstrates how much they care about the community, about our environment and, especially, wanting things better for future generations."

– Phyllis Goff



Connecting across generations with AGE to age.

One of the characteristics that was important over the first 50 years and will continue to be in the years ahead is the respect the Foundation has shown the people in the community.

“One of the things I admire about the Mardag Foundation is the modesty with which they went about their work,” explained John Couchman, former vice president at the Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation. “They knew what they were doing was important, they took it seriously but they always respected that there were people in the community who were coming up with great ideas for how to address problems and they wanted the attention on those doing the work and not on themselves.”

No one knows for sure what the future may bring. The role of foundations may change, tax laws may change, investment returns are not guaranteed. The Mardag Foundation may look different in 50 years. But the spirit of Agnes Ober and her commitment to helping the community will live on, her family and foundation friends firmly believe.

“Philanthropy has greater meaning to me because it’s part of our family legacy,” said Tim Ober. “My father was very adamant that we give back to the community that’s given so much to us. And for my brother and me, that’s been part of who we were growing up; that this was something you just do. I think it’s a reflection of my grandparents’ legacy. Both grandmother and grandfather were very involved in volunteer work and gave so much of themselves back to the community.”

Ober hopes that the 4th generation of Obers and beyond “are going to have some of the same fire and desire to have the type of impact that we have been working on at the Foundation. I think there’s a great deal of energy in this group of emerging leaders. Like their great-grandmother, they have a passion to continue to make a difference in our community.”

As she leaves the board, Cornelia Eberhart hopes that over the next 50 years, the Foundation will continue to be “a player in the communities in Minnesota and do everything we can to make the quality of life better for everyone.”

