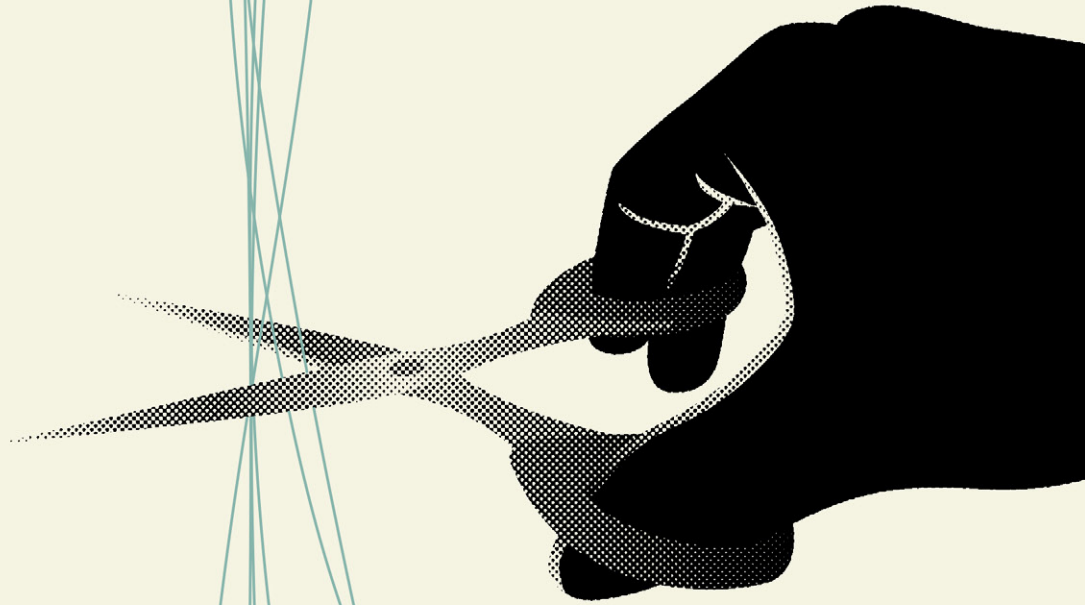




WINGS

A foundation you've likely never heard of is using a trust-based philanthropy approach to quietly give away millions of dollars to local nonprofits. Where is the money coming from? That might surprise you, too.



NOT

STRINGS

BY MAGGIE GINSBERG

IN

spring 2022, Project Babies co-founder Jeanne Erickson got an email from an organization called the Roots & Wings Foundation. They wanted to set up a call to introduce themselves and discuss possibly giving Project Babies a grant. Erickson had never heard of them – and as the volunteer director of a nonprofit organization that is 85% reliant on grants (which require countless hours spent applying and complying each year), she was interested but admittedly wary.

“You’re a little bit guarded because you think, well, this is somebody who wants you to do something for them,” says Erickson. “Then I got on the call with them and I realized this was not what I thought at all.”

A woman named Shana Dall’Osto introduced herself as the executive director of Roots & Wings, explaining that it was a family foundation created in late 2019 with a special interest in funding nonprofits across four key categories: family safety, health, early learning and basic needs. That family? The Faulkners – as in Judith Faulkner, founder of the pioneering, multibillion-dollar health tech software company Epic Systems.

That naturally got Erickson’s attention, as did the “trust-based philanthropy” model Dall’Osto – who turned out to be Faulkner’s daughter – went on to describe: The grants awarded by Roots & Wings are unrestricted, meaning nonprofits can use the money however they see fit. The paperwork is minimal and reporting

requirements are pretty much nonexistent. But it wasn’t what Erickson was learning about Roots & Wings that was most impressive – it was what Roots & Wings already knew about her.

“They had done their homework,” says Erickson, who started Project Babies with Betty Banks in 2006 as part of Banks’ Black-established, Black-run Today Not Tomorrow Inc., for which Erickson also serves as director of operations. (Today Not Tomorrow is perhaps best known for the weekly television show Club TNT, which airs Saturdays at 11 a.m. on Television Wisconsin.) Project Babies holds community baby showers and provides other items like diapers, maternity wear, and clothing for infants and toddlers – requests for which tripled during the pandemic. “They’d gone in and looked at Guidestar,” Erickson says. “They looked at our Facebook page. They did inquiries. They asked Madison Community Foundation’s Tom Linfield about us and he said, ‘Oh yeah, check them out; they’re good people.’”

By the end of the call, Erickson was sold on Roots & Wings, ready to begin what she assumed was a lengthy application process. That’s when she got the biggest surprise of all.

“They said to me, ‘And we’re prepared to give you a grant as of right now.’ It was like, what?” she says, laughing. Roots & Wings had pre-filled the application before the call, then added to it from notes they made as they were interviewing Erickson. All she had to do was review it; add a budget number here, a percentage there; and sign. The two-year grant was for \$20,000 per year. Less than a year later, unprompted, Roots & Wings added another \$10,000 per year.

“So they gifted Project Babies with a total award of \$60,000, no strings attached, unrestricted funds,” Erickson says, shaking her head – she’s used to an entirely different experience.

Today Not Tomorrow received a grant, too, as did another collaborating partner, Harambee Village Doulas. In fact, in 2022, Roots & Wings awarded more than \$40 million to 243 nonprofits in the same trust-based way that Erickson described.

“They’re supporting a lot of organizations around Madison and Wisconsin and people don’t even know about them,” Erickson says. “They keep it so quiet.”

‘IT WAS SOMETHING WE ALWAYS KNEW’

To some, Epic is a mysterious, Disney-sized queen-dom just outside Madison with metaphorical castle walls as high as they are magical. To others it’s a



PHOTO BY HILLARY SCHAVE



COMMUNITY PARTNERS: Jeanne Erickson (pictured) is the volunteer director of Project Babies, which she started in 2006 with Betty Banks of Today Not Tomorrow Inc. Both received Roots & Wings grants.

mega-employer of at least 10,000 people—almost as many as the population of Verona, the city in which it's located—that's responsible for three-quarters of all electronic medical records in the U.S. and generates \$3.8 billion in annual revenue. To Dall'Osto, it's the company her mom started in a cramped basement in 1979, the same year she was born.

"I did not grow up with wealth," Dall'Osto says—nor did her parents. Her mom, a second-generation child of Ukrainian refugees, arrived at the University of Wisconsin-Madison on a full scholarship. So did her dad, pediatrician Gordon Faulkner. They lived in assisted housing and used food stamps before building careers and starting a family. "We were raised to be somewhat thrifty," Dall'Osto says, smiling as she looks down at her shirt. "I'm wearing used clothes right now." Then she recalls answering phones and doing data entry at Epic while still a student at Madison West High School, and wanting to buy a \$20 Gap T-shirt. "I remember Judy saying, 'No, we don't spend money on labels,'" says Dall'Osto, who refers to her parents as Mom and Dad at home but as Judy and Gordon in professional settings. "I was so mad because I really wanted to be cool."

Over the years, as Epic grew at a staggering pace, Faulkner became just as famous for her trademark privacy as for her thriving company—rarely, if ever, granting interviews. But Faulkner made national news in 2015 when she signed The Giving Pledge, committing to give away 99% of her wealth to charitable causes. It's difficult to pinpoint the 79-year-old Faulkner's net worth—her portion of the privately owned company is 47%, and she's not talking—but Forbes magazine estimates \$7.1 billion. It's a staggering, would-be inheritance for her and Gordon's three children. So how did they feel about their parents giving it all away?

"It was something we always knew," Dall'Osto says. "That was always her intention and we all knew that and we supported it. We had enough to live our lives comfortably, and also probably could see that great wealth doesn't always help individuals, especially with my background in nonprofits."

That background is extensive, and it's the reason Dall'Osto was a logical choice to run Roots & Wings (her two siblings are not formally involved). After college and a stint in the Peace Corps in West Africa, Dall'Osto moved to Seattle, where she still lives and where Roots & Wings is now headquartered. She worked with formerly and currently unhoused populations, then spent seven years directing a children's

literacy program for low-income families. As her passion for service work grew, so did her awareness of the way nonprofits are funded. "Always struggling to have enough, and also the frustration of trying to get grants and all the strings that were attached with grants," she says.

Then, in 2012, she got a call from back home. Epic was growing and so was her parents' philanthropy. They wanted Dall'Osto's expertise and help. "So at that time, I went from the asking side to the giving side," she says of launching a fund called The Magic Pebble Foundation. "The Magic Pebble Foundation was just me working out of my house at the same time that I was raising little kids," Dall'Osto says. "Every year, Judy and Gordon would put in some funds and then we would distribute them."

Over the next seven years, between 90 and 100 Dane County nonprofits received grants that they didn't realize—and maybe still don't realize—came from the Faulkners. The Magic Pebble website didn't say anything about Epic or the Faulkners, and by then Dall'Osto was using her married name. "I think Judy and Gordon have always been very private, and the intention was not to get their name on a building or get a lot of recognition, it was just to support the community," Dall'Osto says.

By 2019, they'd sort of outgrown Magic Pebble; Dall'Osto needed staff, and a larger, en-

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PHOTO BY LARRY CHUA

FAMILY MONEY: Shana Dall'Osto (pictured below) is the executive director of the Roots & Wings Foundation, which launched in January 2020 to help distribute the wealth of Dall'Osto's parents, Judith and Gordon Faulkner. Dall'Osto is pictured at RISE in Madison, one of 243 grantees that Roots & Wings supported in 2022.



dowed foundation. They also wanted to apply the trust-based model to as many nonprofits as possible. “Trust-based philanthropy is a big part of what we do and we think about every day,” Dall'Osto says. “How do we show up as partners to our grantees, trying to dismantle the power hierarchy as much as possible, trying to reduce the administrative burden as much as possible?”

Roots & Wings officially launched in January 2020. Because of her work with the Magic Pebble grantees, Dall'Osto and her team were able to get 51 no-application grants out the front door by May 2020—just in time to help organizations navigate the pandemic no one knew was coming. “The things we focused on—safety net, health care, child care, mental health, basic needs, housing, abuse prevention—all of those things were the things that were exacerbated during COVID,” Dall'Osto says. While the government and some funders struggled to remove red tape to get emergency funds to direct service providers and people, Roots & Wings was already operating that way.

“That was already our style and approach to grantmaking, which I have to give credit to Judy, because she not only has a higher risk tolerance, maybe, but also a trust that nonprofits are doing good work,” Dall'Osto says. “This is a belief I share as well—that the folks who are closest to the work know the work best. They know it better than us as funders. And they are overworked and under-resourced.”

For some potential grantees, Roots & Wings seemed too good to be true. “We did have people turn us down because they didn't quite believe us,” Dall'Osto says, smiling. “And then we had to come back the next year and say, ‘See? We are real.’”

‘WE WERE BLOWN AWAY’

Sara Alvarado hadn't heard of Roots & Wings either when she was introduced in June 2022 through One City Schools, which had just received a grant. One City Schools is the pilot site for OWN IT: Building Black Wealth, the nonprofit Alvarado and Tiffany Malone co-created in 2020 and opened in 2021. Roots &



PHOTO BY LARRY CHUA

Wings wanted to talk. Alvarado and Malone spent a long time preparing for what they assumed would be a typical info call—one in which they needed to explain and defend their nonprofit. “But there was nothing typical about this call,” Alvarado says.

As with Erickson’s Project Babies, Roots & Wings already knew a great deal about OWN IT. Even better, their philosophy aligned with that of OWN IT, which provides \$15,000 grants to homebuyers for down payments. It is designed to eliminate barriers to wealth and homeownership for families of color who—because of redlining and other racist practices—don’t have the same generational wealth or other connections that some white borrowers have historically had.

“It felt affirming, because our model is a trust-based model as well,” Alvarado says. “What we are fighting against is the whitewashing in the real estate and financial industries when it comes to wealth-building in Black and brown communities. And the layered restrictions that government-funded down payment programs require,” Alvarado says. “To be quite honest, when government entities try to give us money, we say no. Because there’s always restrictions and we’re like,

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‘No, this is why we’re doing this.’ The whole point is that the restrictions are the barriers and are actually creating more wealth gaps.”

And so, like Erickson, Alvarado and Malone were shocked at the end of the 45-minute phone call when the four women representing Roots & Wings said they were granting OWN IT \$50,000 in 2022 and \$50,000 in 2023, and the application was already filled out.

“Tiffany and I both started crying,” Alvarado says. “And I don’t cry that easily. But it can be exhausting to

DOWN TO HELP: Roots & Wings has helped support OWN IT: Building Black Wealth, the Madison nonprofit started by Tiffany Malone (pictured left) and Sara Alvarado (pictured right). OWN IT provides down-payment grants to homebuyers who face systemic barriers due to redlining and other historically racist practices.

constantly talk about something that you work so hard on and that has massive impact, only to be left with enthusiastic interest and no follow-up or investment. And it happens a lot, so when they had already come to us with all their research completed and ready to award us the grant, we were blown away.”

Five months after that first call, Roots & Wings unexpectedly granted OWN IT another \$25,000 per year. Since Alvarado and Malone are volunteers and 100% of donations they receive goes to the \$15,000 grants that have so far aided eight Madison-area families, they were able to use the money to hire OWN IT’s first-ever employee in January, director Myesha Thompson.

For Dall’Osto’s part, she feels that she’s landed her dream job—and that all roads have led to this moment where she can combine the values of her upbringing with her professional training and experience to have a direct impact on the families who need it most. “We hope that it makes a difference,” she says, describing a recent visit to Madison where in just one day she got to sit on the floor with Early Head Start babies and learn how Roots & Wings funding helped a family stay in a hotel instead of on the street. Then she met brand-new babies recently born to justice-involved women at Arc Community Services. She rounded out the day at Just Dane, which works to reduce incarceration and recidivism through an array of direct service programs. It’s these nonprofits she hopes to draw attention to, not her family—but she admits it is kind of nice to finally talk about what her parents have been up to.

“Just for me to be able to acknowledge them is nice,” she says.

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