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Hand in hand, we look to make a difference

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By Ron Kitchens,

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You would be hard pressed to find anywhere else in the nation, besides the Kalamazoo Region, where philanthropy and business investment occur hand in hand. Our Community Capitalistic approach to community development is what sets our region apart from others.

Only in Kalamazoo can you find foundations not only committed to doing traditional social good for the underprivileged and fine arts, but also truly understanding the need to finance economic development. Likewise in Kalamazoo, businesses are willing to go the opposite way in the spectrum and support causes for the human good. And most of the time, it is done anonymously or under the radar.

I have worked all over the country and had the experience of dealing with a lot of different benefactors. Oftentimes, I've had the door shut in my face. In Kalamazoo, to quite the contrary, I've had the call from potential benefactors to come to their door.

They really get "it" here that, beyond giving what many see to be hand-outs, they need to assist companies in growing jobs. They understand that a well-paying job makes a positive impact for generations to come. In a family unit, children benefit in a multitude of ways from their parents' ability to provide for them. Not only does it alleviate stress from their lives, but it allows them to live in a safe environment, obtain an education, establish levels for their own achievement and view the workforce and world in an optimistic light. Our community's future depends on our local companies' ability to grow, be competitive and change with the times as we direct our efforts toward poverty reduction through the creation of jobs and an increase in personal wealth for individuals at all income levels. There has certainly never before been a time in our life when the value of a job is so obvious.

With a gift of \$1,000 in 1925, Dr. W.E. Upjohn helped to establish the Kalamazoo Community Foundation, and in doing so, he laid the official groundwork for our community's stewardship. Today, the foundation's assets have grown to approximately \$260 million for which it uses its funds to help more than 800 charitable organizations.

Down the road in Battle Creek, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation was established to support opportunities that would protect and nurture children, our most precious resource. Originally focused on its hometown, the organization now looks both at home and around the world for philanthropy and volunteerism opportunities that are keeping relevant with changing social needs. From their emphasis on education to feeding the poor to protecting the most vulnerable, they are growing Dr. Kellogg's legacy.

Often called a "guardian angel" for those less fortunate, Irving S. Gilmore established his foundation to continue on his acts of personal and financial kindness, usually done anonymously, in perpetuity. Carefully balancing between concern for civic, cultural and underprivileged needs, the foundation's goal is to make Kalamazoo a better place to live. Our partnership with that foundation has benefitted the community through the creation of employment in order to reduce poverty and lessen the burden of government.

The Monroe-Brown Foundation intends for the good it does to provide support for higher education in the state of Michigan and to advance economic development in the Kalamazoo community through programs designed to encourage the retention and employment of local scholars. The foundation partners with mine, Southwest Michigan First, to offer internship opportunities in our region's most competitive and technical companies to students at our local colleges and universities. This year we had over 1,000 applicants for over 20 coveted spots. The program has a dual-bottom line: The companies get the benefit of seeing raw, young talent and the students experience firsthand the opportunities available to them here at home.

From its commitment to a better world where all are respected for their gifts to the protection of primates to building community capacity, the Arcus Foundation's global headquarters in Kalamazoo continues to bring new ideas and research to our state.

As for these anonymous gifts of these organizations or benevolent donors, in Kalamazoo, rarely do you find the name of these givers on the name of a building. They like to let their work speak for them – take the Kalamazoo Promise for example. Since it was announced in 2005, that program has changed the lives of over a thousand students and their families who may have never had the chance to attend college and yet no one knows who is behind this tremendous gift that has also grown an estimated 5,000 new residents in the community.

On the flip side of the foundations' support of local job creation, the companies that benefit do not forget their role.

Bronson Healthcare Group has offered its employees low-interest loans on homes purchased in Kalamazoo's urban area. Schupan & Sons assists its employees with their home mortgages. For years, Humphrey Products has allowed its outlying land to be farmed and the harvested produce to be used by Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes. Kendall Electric which has purchased part of that property for its new location is now participating in that same tradition. When the Portage Community Center needed bike racks on its facility, it simply took a call by my team to Landscape Forms for shiny new bike racks to be delivered and installed on site. Nulty Insurance has just led a fundraising effort for a local program called Urban Youth for Africa, sponsored by the Kalamazoo Deacons Conference allowing 10 at-risk students from Kalamazoo Public Schools to travel to Sierra Leone to realize the incredible power they possess to change their world for the better.

Then, there is the Kalamazoo United Way. Our region should be proud of the fact that, per capita, it leads the nation in giving.

Hand in hand, our region seamlessly blends the work of foundations and businesses to give individuals, families and the community an unprecedented chance to succeed. Let our tradition continue.