

## Power of numbers can bring results

Social change is most likely to be genuine and lasting when people and organizations pull together, says Renee Zientek, assistant vice chancellor for university outreach at the University of Michigan-Flint. And real collaboration, she notes, requires real work.

“The most successful partnerships are built on open communication, honest relationships and trust,” Zientek said. “That combination isn’t always easy to achieve, especially if folks have traditionally been on different sides of the conversation. But the potential outcomes, both for the partners and the community, make it well worth the effort.”

Charles Stewart Mott would have undoubtedly welcomed her point. He created his foundation in 1926 out of not only a deep affec-

tion for his adopted hometown of Flint, but also a clear understanding that one institution cannot solve a community’s challenges.

This set the stage for what has since become a hallmark of Mott’s grantmaking, both locally and around the world: helping people and organizations at every level come together to explore their individual concerns, find common ground and work toward shared solutions.

Supporting partnerships and collaboration is also a key thread linking the Foundation’s

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▼ The Genesee County Out-of-School Youth Initiative partnership works to support and expand educational opportunities for local school dropouts.

four grantmaking programs, which are working jointly to help the Flint region write a new chapter in its unfolding and sometimes difficult story.

One example of that collaborative approach in 2008 was a one-year, \$55,000 grant — made through Mott’s Pathways Out of Poverty program — to the Community Foundation of Greater Flint<sup>4</sup> for the launch of the Genesee County Out-of-School Youth Initiative. The initiative is designed to assemble and support a local partnership aimed at strengthening educational services for area young people who have dropped out of school.<sup>5</sup>

Statistics show that more than half of the young people in some Flint area schools abandon their studies before graduation. While the county’s suburban schools generally have much lower dropout rates, many are seeing their numbers increase.

As the initiative’s convening organization, the community foundation has brought together representatives from city and county schools, workforce development and child advocacy organizations, community organizing groups, local governments, and higher education institutions.

Those partners are surveying other agencies and organizations throughout the county to examine factors contributing to the dropout crisis and to assess the available resources for reconnecting area young people to educational opportunities.

The findings, says Patrick Naswell, the community foundation’s vice president of community impact, will help the group identify meaningful, long-term solutions to the problem; inform local and state policymaking on issues of dropout prevention; expand and increase the pathways to graduation and high school completion; and bring additional partners to the initiative.



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**PATRICK NASWELL, COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF GREATER FLINT**

This cooperative, community-driven strategy, he says, offers perhaps the best hope for stemming the tide of the dropout crisis in Genesee County.

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**T**he role of collaboration in creating local change is also evident in the work of the Flint River Corridor Alliance. This group of representatives from the community’s public, private and nonprofit sectors seeks, through advocacy and direct action, the restoration and responsible redevelopment of the river in the downtown Flint area.

Mott made a one-year, \$42,936 grant in 2007 through its Environment program to the UM-Flint to fund administrative activities related to the alliance. The Foundation increased that support in 2008 with a supplemental six-month, \$21,000 grant.<sup>6</sup>

The alliance, launched in 2005, is made up of 11

partner organizations and more than 100 community members. These include neighborhood groups; educational, health-care and governmental bodies; nonprofit and community organizations; businesses; churches; and individuals.

Zientek, who is the alliance’s chairperson, says ensuring that every stakeholder has a voice in shaping the alliance’s goals, as well as a role in seeing them through, is central to the partnership’s design.

“It’s about people with diverse perspectives coming to the table, engaging each other on the issues and developing a mutual understanding of possible solutions,” she said. “This better positions them to combine resources and turn a shared vision into reality.”

The alliance’s current projects include identifying environmentally sound uses for vacant and abandoned properties along the river; calling for the repair of aging infrastructure on the waterway; and promoting the river as a source of recreational activities, such as canoeing, kayaking and fishing.



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Leveraging relationships and resources was also a highlight of the Building Excellence, Sustainability and Trust (BEST) project in 2008.

The project was launched in 2003 with the collaborative support of Mott, the community foundation, the Ruth Mott Foundation and the United Way of Genesee County.<sup>7</sup>

The goal of BEST is to grow the capacity of the county's nonprofit sector to better meet the community's changing needs. This includes helping participating agencies assess their strengths, weaknesses and opportunities; obtain funding for capacity-building activities; work with consultants and technical assistance providers to strengthen their organization's operations and structure; and access ongoing training and customized follow-up to ensure sustainable progress.

Funding for BEST in 2008 included a one-year, \$275,000 grant — made through Mott's Flint Area program — to the United Way, the fiscal sponsor for the project.

The Foundation's Civil Society program is also supporting BEST through a 21-month, \$300,000 grant made in 2007 to Washington, D.C.-based BoardSource for the Building Nonprofit Leadership Initiative in Flint and Genesee County.

The initiative — a joint project of BoardSource and BEST — was launched in early 2008 to help strengthen the capacity, participation and effectiveness of board member service at area nonprofits. A summit on issues of board governance attracted more than 300 area leaders, while BoardSource and local consultants have teamed up to help more than a dozen



▼ BEST consultant Terry Wisner (right) talks with staff from Motherly Intercession in Flint.

local nonprofits — including the alliance — explore new strategies and approaches to governance and board development. Additional agencies have completed the initiative's board self-assessment process or participated in other governance-related trainings and workshops.

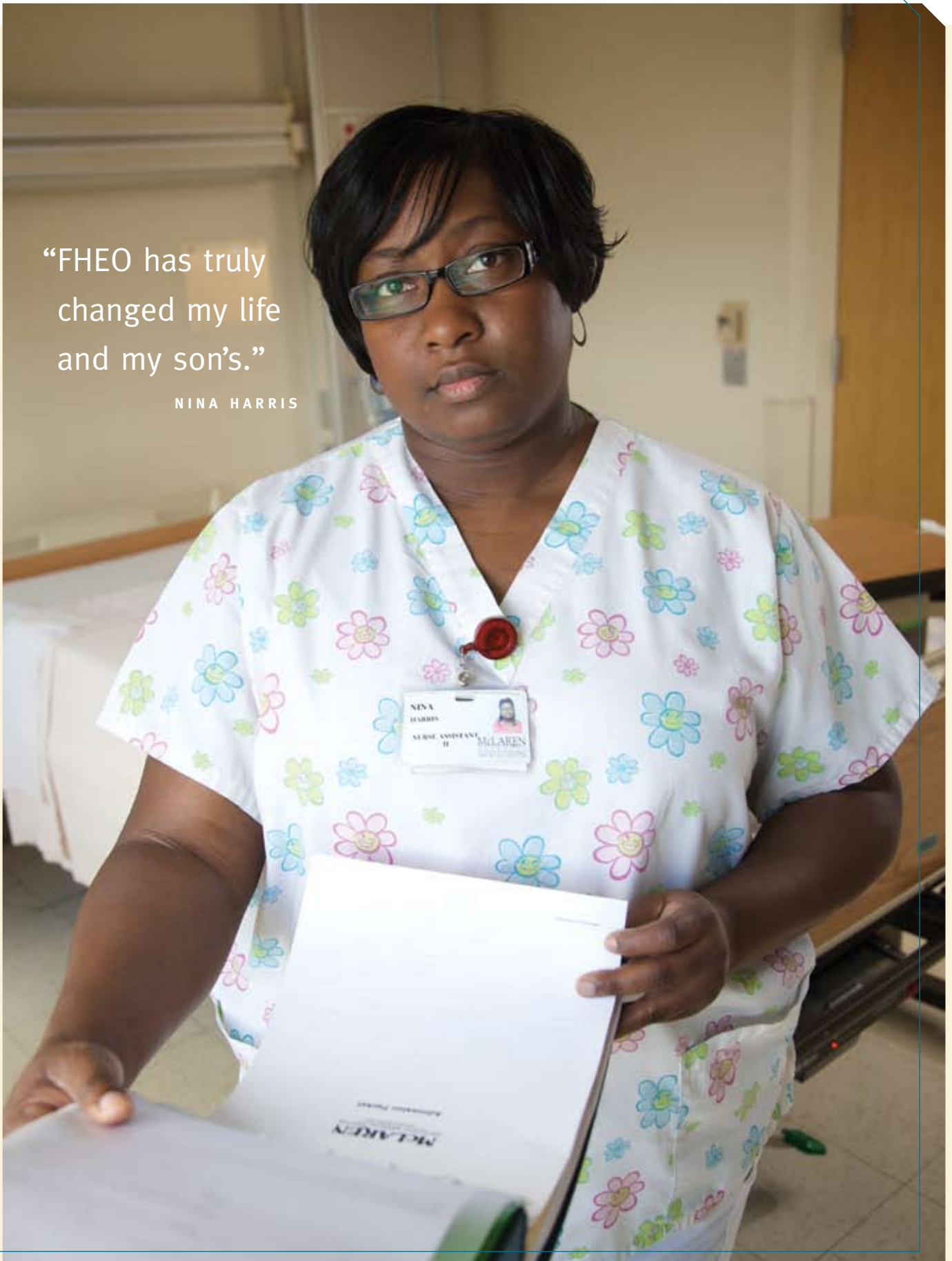
BEST Director Jennifer Acree says this collective effort to strengthen the local nonprofit sector illustrates that “while we're not the only community in the country facing such challenges, we are one of the few taking a collaborative approach to address them.”

She also believes that, both in Genesee County and around the country, partnerships at all levels are an invaluable asset when confronting what might otherwise be overwhelming concerns.

“We should always challenge ourselves to connect with others, create a shared vision and act as stewards for our communities,” Acree said. “It needs to be part of our culture, where partnerships are valued in both the up times and the down.” ▼

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NINA HARRIS



## Realizing her destiny through education

**N**ina Harris remembers daydreaming as a little girl about becoming a nurse one day. After graduating from high school, the Flint resident, now 37, took jobs as an aide in local nursing and adult-care homes, eager for the chance to touch the lives of others.

While she thoroughly enjoyed the work, Harris found few opportunities to advance into higher-paying jobs. By the time she gave birth to her son, Nolan, in 2005, this single parent knew she needed to secure her family's financial future. But she also knew she couldn't do it alone.

Today, the partnerships behind the Flint Healthcare Employment Opportunities program (FHEO) are helping Harris and other area residents chart a new course, both for themselves and the community.

The FHEO works with local partners to help participants obtain the necessary tuition, books and supplies for the study of health care, and connect with entry-level positions in the field. The program also helps students overcome barriers to employment, such as access to transportation and child care. And it is working with area employers to ensure that each graduate's skills — as well as the sector's own employment practices, such as job retention, promotion and compensation — meet local needs.

The FHEO partners include area hospitals and nursing-care centers, workforce development programs, and intermediate and higher education institutions. Several are Mott grantees.

The Foundation's continuing support of the FHEO in 2008 was a six-month, \$76,050 grant to the Greater Flint Health Coalition (GFHC), the program's lead, coordinating agency.

Building community relationships is nothing new to the coalition, itself a partnership of local stakeholders working to improve the health status of county residents and the quality and cost-effectiveness of the area health-care delivery system. For example, it was part of a collaborative effort that in 2001 launched the Genesee Health Plan, which provides basic health, diagnostic and prescription drug benefits to uninsured, low-income county residents.<sup>8</sup>

And while different experiences, interests and

points of view can make the collaborative process complex, says GFHC President Stephen Skorcz, such factors also can produce "more resources and energy, make the partners more connected and invested, and the outcomes more powerful."

Janie Stewart, vice president of career and corporate services at Baker College of Flint (a FHEO partner organization), agrees. In addition to skills training, Baker offers FHEO participants a number of workshops designed to help them transition to a career in health care.

Stewart says partnerships help bring people and organizations out of their comfort zone, encouraging communication and an understanding of the unique contributions each has to offer.

"Every one of us, working on our own, can make a difference," she said. "And when we work together, we can create an ocean of change."

That change is evident in the FHEO's continued success. Of its 213 graduates, roughly 60 percent have obtained entry-level jobs in the health-care industry, while others have launched careers in different sectors.

But the program's importance — and the collaborative spirit behind it — goes beyond simple economics, says Tim Srock, vice president of human resources at McLaren Regional Medical Center, another FHEO partner.

"The program is doing more than helping people get jobs," he said. "FHEO graduates, through their caring interaction with patients and families, are also impacting the community's spiritual, emotional and physical health. Those are the seeds for moving Genesee County forward."

Harris looks forward to counting herself among FHEO alumni. She enrolled in 2005 and a year later was accepted into Mott Community College's nursing program. She continues to work part-time as a nurse's aide while completing her clinical studies, both at McLaren, and plans to graduate in May 2010 with an associate degree in nursing. She hopes to then obtain her state license as a registered nurse.

"FHEO has truly changed my life and my son's," Harris said. "By becoming a nurse, I hope to do the same for others." ▀