



Street view of Simmons House at 30 Pleasant Street, Woodstock, home of OHF.

Ottauquechee Health Foundation

Serving communities in need

By Dian Parker

Photography by Lynn Bohannon

Many residents of Vermont are having a hard time getting their basic needs met. With the rising cost of food as well as rent increases, many people are barely able to live from paycheck to paycheck. Vermont has an aging population, with people 65 and older comprising 20 percent of the population. People with disabilities under the age of 65 is over 10 percent, and veterans comprise 5 percent of Vermont's current population.

Thankfully there is Ottawaquechee Health Foundation (OHF) to help these and other Vermonters in their catchment area who are in need. Through financial assistance, community partnerships, and wellness initiatives as well as education opportunities, OHF has assisted in health care needs for the last 27 years. The core towns they work with are Barnard, Bridgewater, Hartland, Killington, Plymouth, Pomfret, Quechee, Reading, and Woodstock.





Clockwise from top: Hali Robinson, executive director; Bruce Seely, grandson of Gertrude Mertens; Meg Seely, his wife; and Beth Robinson, grants coordinator. Beth assists a good neighbor grant applicant. OHF's welcoming reception area with posted office hours.



Glad Rags committee members utilize OHF's spacious conference room for their post-spring sale meeting. OHF's conference room is available for Simmons House tenants and nonprofit organizations.



PROVIDING ACCESS TO WELLNESS FUNDING

OHF was created in 1996 seeded by the estate of Gertrude Mertens to carry out her wish to ensure that all community members continue to receive health care in the community. She was driven by a strong conviction that community matters, neighbors should look after one another, and those who have the means should share. Because of Mrs. Mertens and her family's legacy, OHF has granted millions of dollars for health care in their catchment area.

Many service providers for these communities work alongside OHF to offer discounts to grant applicants. OHF grants of \$225,000 enabled access to over \$302,000 in health and wellness services in 2022. The health care providers and organizations offer help with obtaining hearing aids, new glasses, mental health support, prescription drugs, and dental work.

Around 70 percent of the population served by OHF is under 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL). If a household of one is within 200 percent of FPL or

"I grew up in Woodstock with a strong sense of community. I like helping people and love being a part of an organization that helps people in need."

— Hali Robinson, director of OHF

\$29,160 annual income, you can imagine how great an impact it would be if that individual receives a grant, for an example, to help pay for hearing aids that can cost \$5,000 to \$7,000. Grants from OHF can also help pay for dental work, optometry, and elder care. They have home-care grants for up to \$3,000 that can help pay caregivers. (To

understand the guidelines on the federal poverty level, visit aspe.hhs.gov/topics/poverty-economic-mobility/poverty-guidelines.)

AN OPEN-DOOR POLICY

Hali Robinson has been the new director of OHF since February 2023. "We are a privately funded nonprofit organization and want to serve the needs of individuals in their catchment area," Hali says. "OHF is involved in two different work groups that arose from the 2018 Community Health Needs Assessment performed by Mount Ascutney Hospital and Health Center. We are involved with the Food Security work group and the Strengthening

Community Grants Funded to Date in 2023

- **Barnard Academy**
Helmets for sledding and skating
- **Upper Valley Haven**
Dental supplies for individuals from our catchment area
- **Thompson Senior Center**
Author travel expenses for "Alzheimer's Canyon" presentation
- **The Nest**
Postpartum support group held at Artistree
- **Mindful Connections**
Yoga and art for local middle school students
- **Jess Kimball Wellness**
Home visit support for pre- and postnatal periods
- **Summer SOAK**
Scholarships for four students from our catchment area
- **Second Growth**
Summer enrichment program for local middle school students
- **The Ottauquechee School**
Midday snacks to address food insecurity
- **Sensory Pathways**
Visual instruction for guided movements to help with motor skills, balance, hand-eye coordination, and spatial awareness in five area elementary schools
- **MAHHC Primary Care Clinic**
Bike helmets - UVM "Protect Your Head at All Times"



Above: Folks are often greeted by Chance, Beth's friendly office dog.

Left: Street view of Simmons House, home to OHF and their many tenants.



Families work group. I act as representative for our community in these work groups.”

As a young mother with an eight-month-old son, Hali understands how difficult it might be for postpartum mothers. “OHF is here to help by providing community grants to doulas: one provides home visits and another facilitates a postpartum support group. We have provided community grants for midday snacks at a local elementary school to address food insecurity, we have provided a grant for an author to visit Thompson Senior Center, and many more. I grew up in Woodstock with a

Giving From the Heart

By Bruce and Meg Seely

(Gertrude's grandson and his wife)



To better understand OHF, one needs to appreciate Woodstock of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s when some of the people who were drawn to the region to live permanently shaped the Woodstock of today. People who remember those times will recall a few visionary philanthropists who settled here from New York, Boston, and other metropolitan areas to live a more rural and bucolic life.

While Laurance Rockefeller buried Woodstock's power lines and provided the village a central hub to draw employment opportunities and attract tourists, there was another breed of generosity that made contributions that had

lasting impact. One such example of this generosity was Gertrude Mertens.

In 1958 the citizens of Woodstock and surrounding communities raised funds to acquire Simmons House, purchase medical equipment, and hire medical staff, including a physician, a dentist, and nurses. Woodstock is unique in that the residents of the community created its own health center. Most health centers have been created by government, business, or medical organizations. In 1973 the then state-of-the-art OHC was built behind Simmons House and was outfitted with up-to-date equipment. It was initially governed by a board comprised of a cross-section of the community.

In 1993, Gertrude Mertens died. As her estate was being settled, it was becoming impossible to operate a free-standing clinic, so in 1996 an agreement was reached with Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center to take over the management of the health center. This left many engaged citizens concerned about the loss of local control. It also raised concerns about affordability and diminished local access to care.

OHF was created in 1996, seeded by the estate of Gertrude Mertens, to carry out her wishes to ensure that all community members continue to receive health care in the community. Over the course of the last 30 years, OHF has granted millions of dollars for health care to the people of the region.

What motivated Gertrude and others to give back so generously to the region? Each would undoubtedly offer their own rationale, probably understated and humble. But what a difference they have made. Gertrude and her family's legacy include but are not limited to:

- The Woodstock Learning Clinic (co-founder, major contributor)
- Pivotal Steps (quietly meets the needs of the most vulnerable)
- Union Arena (major contributor)
- Ottauquechee Health Foundation (visionary and seeded fund)
- Planned Parenthood of Vermont (instrumental in establishing)
- Mertens House (14-bed long-term nursing care facility)

As captured in a book entitled *Generosity, A Family Story* presented to Peter and Jennifer Brock in gratitude for the Mertens Family's 75 years of support: Philanthropy comes from the heart, and where a person chooses to give a glimpse into what she or he holds dear.

While Gertrude Mertens was a staunch supporter of universal causes such as equal rights for women and minorities, access to health care and education, funding for the arts, reproductive freedom, and sustaining a healthy environment, few things were as dear to her as her community.



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Beth Robinson (not related to Hali) has been OHF's grants coordinator for the last seven years. Beth worked in a private dental practice for 25 years before coming to OHF. "I came to the foundation to see how they could help me navigate medical bills and the high cost of prescriptions after my husband was diagnosed with cancer. They were so wonderful, kind, helpful, and supportive during that time." Soon after her husband passed away, Beth stopped by OHF to thank the foundation for all the support they had given. Ironically, that same day, the current grants coordinator was leaving the foundation and Beth was offered a job.

Both Hali and Beth are deeply committed to offering services to those in need. They want people to know OHF is here and that they have an open-door policy during office hours. People can come to the office for information and to get an application to apply for assistance. They will make time outside of office hours if need be.

HERE FOR THE COMMUNITY

Through word of mouth from schools, nurses, social workers, senior centers, and food shelves, OHF strives to get the word out that they are here for the



Hali checks her email.

community. They are updating their website and will have a room in the Pleasant Street building for laptop use to sign up for resources and to fill out applications or attend telehealth appointments.

OHF has a grants committee that is made up of three to five of the ten board members. There are 500 members of OHF that act as advocates for the foundation. They are the voice of the community and vote on the bylaws, attend the annual meeting, and vote on new board members.

Hali and Beth's energetic commitment and passion are evident in all they do at Ottauquechee Health Foundation. Hali says, "I want to thank all our donors, members, and the board for all the work they do. We are always looking for new members and volunteers and donors to help us keep OHF alive for another 27 years." 🍷

MORE

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