

Community Engagement Institute (CEI) Monthly Newsletter

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SEPTEMBER 2024 NEWSLETTER

CEI TURNS 40!

What! You too? I thought I was the only one. – C.S. Lewis

Perhaps no other statement better represents the essence of a self-help support group. Life is full of challenges, whether it is physical illness, bereavement, addiction, parenting, or mental health. Unfortunately, we often face these challenges alone without support or guidance that is helpful during such times. The epidemic of loneliness and isolation, especially during stressful life situations, was recognized in 2023 by the Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy. More specifically, he calls upon community organizations, workplaces, local and state governments, and others to advance social connections that are vital to health and well-being.



Recognizing the importance of social connections is exactly what Evelyn Middlestadt (pictured), a Wichita Social Worker, did in 1984. She had the courage and commitment to start the Self-Help Network and began promoting self-help support groups as a valuable community asset to promote social connections. As the story goes, Evelyn was nearing retirement and started the Self-Help Network on her kitchen table. She and her mother educated health and human service professionals about the benefits of groups. They diligently learned about support groups meeting in churches, clinics, and people's homes so that they could be more broadly publicized. The operations quickly outgrew what could be supported on a kitchen table and moved to WSU's psychology department under the direction of Dr. Greg Meissen. Within a few years it became statewide, providing referrals, education, and research focused on self-help groups. Soon after it became nationally recognized as one of the top self-help clearinghouses in the United States.

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has. – Margaret Mead



While it could be argued that Mead's quote is overused, I cannot think of one better that represents the thousands of Kansans we've been fortunate to work with over the decades. These Kansans are not unlike the local heroes highlighted in Bill Berkowitz's 1987 book, *Local Heroes: The rebirth of heroism in America*. Dr. Berkowitz published a series of interviews in the book, highlighting 20 "ordinary people" who worked with others to improve neighborhoods and communities. A common thread through the interviews is that it typically was not one individual, but often a group who were committed and recognized the importance of an issue not only for themselves, but others as well.

As the Self-Help Network transitioned to the Center for Community Support and Research (CCSR) in the mid-1990s we started working with more Kansas heroes. Over the 40 years we are grateful for our partnerships with them. Among these local heroic Kansans are health coalition members addressing the lack of healthy options in their community; civic leaders concerned about preventing fentanyl overdoses; business leaders trying to grow their regional economy; childcare providers and advocates raising attention about the growing need for accessible childcare; community health workers supporting persons as they navigate health decisions; mental health consumers providing support through leading peer-led organizations; and volunteers giving their time and talent to address poverty in Kansas communities.

Oh, the Places You'll Go! – Dr. Seuss

As his last published work before Dr. Seuss died in 1991, *Oh, the Places You'll Go* has become well-recognized not only as a children's book, but also referenced at graduations and other milestones. In his clever and colorful writing, Dr. Seuss congratulates the reader for the great places they will go. At the same time, Dr. Seuss provides a healthy dose of reality about the journey, recognizing that along the way there will be "bang-ups" and "hang-ups" and that you may be "left in a lurch." Despite these setbacks, he ends the book with renewed confidence that "you'll find the bright places" and "you'll move mountains!"

In 2009, Dr. Meissen stepped down as CCSR Director and started a phased retirement. Having been with the organization since the mid-1990s, I stepped into the Director role. Through dedicated staff and expanding community partnerships, we realized we were ready to take an additional step on our organizational journey. In 2015 we were formally recognized by the Kansas Board of Regents as the Community Engagement Institute (CEI), serving as a cornerstone to WSU's commitment to community partnerships.

As we take a moment to celebrate CEI's 40th Anniversary, the Dr. Seuss title seems fitting for many reasons. I think of the intertwined journeys of each staff and student who have been part of the organization. CEI staff have traveled thousands and thousands of miles to Kansas places as we've partnered with local communities and organizations. Finally, I'm thankful for our journey as an organization from a kitchen table to one of WSU's largest collections of centers dedicated to serving the community.



It has been an amazing 40 years, but we are eager to be off to other bright places – look forward to seeing you at our 40th Anniversary Celebration! – Dr. Scott Wituk, Executive Director

CELEBRATE WITH US BY SHARING YOUR STORIES

As we reflect on 40 years of CEI, we want to hear your stories! Your insights help shape our future, and we'd love for you to take a few moments to fill out a quick form. Here a few questions to get you thinking:

- How did we help make an impact?
- Who from CEI do you remember and why?
- If you could describe CEI in one word after 40 years, what would it be and why?
- What stands out to you most about CEI's journey over the past 40 years?

Your responses mean the world to us as we celebrate this milestone together. Thank you for being part of the CEI community!

[Share a Story](#)

PLEASE JOIN US FOR OUR 40TH ANNIVERSARY EVENT

October 28, 2024 | 4 – 6 p.m. | The Niche, 124 S. Broadway

Special Guests: Dr. Rick Muma, WSU President, and Dr. Shirley Lefever, WSU Executive Vice President and Provost

Join us as we commemorate four decades of excellence and dedication to our mission. The evening will be filled with reflection, appreciation, and anticipation for what lies ahead.

We will be:

- Applauding Our Past: Reflecting on the individuals, efforts, and impact that have shaped our historical journey.
- Appreciating Our Now: Expressing gratitude for the current work, collaborative efforts, and immediate impact we are making.
- Ascending to Our Future: Anticipating and embracing the possibilities that lie ahead as we look forward to the future.

We look forward to celebrating this milestone with you – our inspiring staff, both past and present, our friends and families – and our valued partners who, through our collective efforts, have helped advance CEI's mission of building vibrant communities and dynamic organizations that are supported, connected, and empowered to drive meaningful progress. – Dr. Scott Wituk, Executive Director



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