How a Private Foundation Backed Trusted Partners When Crisis Struck its Home Region

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A post-COVID-19 remote meeting of the Northern NJ Community Foundation, a Russell Berrie Foundation grantee.

Though the epicenter of COVID-19 in the United States has shifted to other regions, in early spring, New York and New Jersey were the national hot spot, accounting for the bulk of the country’s cases and deaths. One family in Freehold, New Jersey, lost five relatives to the virus, which had infected at least 19 family members—a tragic example of the kind of damage this disease can inflict.

About an hour drive north of Freehold, in Bergen County, sits the headquarters of the Russell Berrie Foundation, a private foundation formed in 1985 by the late CEO of a successful gifts and greeting cards company. One of the foundation’s areas of giving is support for communities in New Jersey, so when COVID-19 struck the region it calls home, the foundation faced tough decisions about its response—how much to give in economically uncertain times, and where, exactly, to direct funds.

The result was a round of $4.48 million in emergency grants announced in May, supporting organizations in the U.S. and Israel providing COVID-19 relief efforts. The funder’s approach is an illustrative case study of a relatively modest private foundation responding to a global crisis—by moving new funds, but also relying on longstanding relationships and knowledge about its existing areas of giving.

The Russell Berrie Foundation bears the name of the late Russ Berrie, the Bronx-born son of a jewelry salesman. Berrie was the chairman and CEO of Russ Berrie & Company, which he started in a tiny rented garage and grew into a nine-figure business. When he passed in 2002, his wife Angelica Berrie took over as CEO of the company for a time, before focusing primarily on her work as president of the foundation.

These days, the funder supports diabetes care and research—it’s given tens of millions toward the disease—and Israel’s cultural and economic vitality, elevating the profession of sales, interfaith bridge-building, and strengthening community in New Jersey. The charity lists about a dozen staff, and through the years has given away more than $300 million. According to tax records, the foundation held some $220 million in assets and gave away close to $15 million in one recent year.

While its emergency funding addresses the pandemic, decisions also track closely with the foundation’s mission, prioritizing direct grants to medical institutions and healthcare providers, as well as organizations addressing the needs of vulnerable populations in the wake of the pandemic. In the unfolding story of philanthropy’s role in COVID-19 relief, this is a common theme that’s emerged—funders tapping into established relationships and focus areas to provide vital support. This has been especially true of the Russell Berrie Foundation, as many of its emergency grants went to trusted partners the foundation has been supporting for years, working in the hard-hit tri-state community.
But how did these strong, long-lasting relationships take shape? And what can grantseekers learn from them about why funders back certain programs, especially during a time of so many urgent needs?

"Russ was an individual entrepreneur, and what he infused into the foundation was a sense of entrepreneurialism. Similarly, we also look for organizations that have great leadership," said Ruth Salzman, Russell Berrie Foundation CEO, in a recent interview.

Salzman has been with the foundation for more than a decade, after working at JPMorgan Chase for nearly 25 years, and also at Citibank. A steady leader herself, Salzman was quick to point out the thread of strong leadership among their grantees, not to mention the leadership of Angelica Berrie herself.

Early on during the pandemic, Salzman says Angelica Berrie emphasized that this was not the time to sit on their wallets, even as some other funders took a more cautious approach. “We’ll deal with our portfolio later. Right now, we have the resources, so we’re going to spend," Salzman says of Angelica’s firm position.

**A Premier Diabetes Center**

Most of the foundation’s $4.48 million in COVID-19 emergency grants are based in existing relationships, and perhaps none is more illustrative than a grant to the Naomi Berrie Diabetes Center at Columbia University Irving Medical Center, which received $50,000 for equipment and technology to meet patients’ needs remotely. The center is the funder’s most prominent effort, and bears the name of Russ Berrie’s mother, reflecting the personal impact the disease has had on the family.

Columbia M.D. Robin Goland serves as co-founder and co-director of the center, and is a good example of the kind of leader that the Russell Berrie Foundation looks for: Goland was Russ Berrie’s doctor, and treated his case of diabetes. But she also had a larger vision for reimagining diabetes treatment, and pitched these ideas to the Berrie family.

“We asked a pretty simple question: ‘Where should you go when you have diabetes in New York City so you can get the best care?’ In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was no answer to that question. Now, there is,” Goland says.

The Berrie Center was launched in the late 1990s in Washington Heights, and provides a combination of care and research for a wide range of children and adults living with the disease. The center is also able to tap into the other resources at Columbia University, including neuroscience, cardiology and genetics, giving it a better chance to cracking the mechanisms behind diabetes.

The latest $50,000 grant will focus on telehealth, which is quickly becoming part of our new normal under social distancing precautions. Goland herself admits that adjusting to this new way of practicing isn’t exactly natural for doctors either, particularly with a condition like diabetes, which requires a huge amount of self-care, and has traditionally been managed with the help of frequent visits and contact with healthcare providers.

“Our practice is a microcosm of the city. We have little kids and adults, rich people, poor people. Just a range of diversity. But when I started doing these virtual video visits, health disparities got unmasked immediately,” Goland tells me.

But she and her patients are adjusting, in part because the Russell Berrie Foundation grant has helped the center buy new hardware and software for underserved patients. Goland emphasizes the sheer amount of technology involved in effectively managing diabetes, including insulin pumps that are attached to a patient’s hip.

It’s also worth noting that diabetes is one of the top preexisting conditions that can result in more severe outcomes when combined with COVID-19, along with obesity and high blood pressure, so making sure the disease is well managed is even more important these days.

Looking toward the future, Goland says that telehealth is likely here to stay, making the Berrie Foundation’s early funding critical, just as it was when the center was getting off the ground in the 1990s.

“Telemedicine is rapidly moving from an emergency stopgap maneuver to just part of what we offer… If you’re nervous about COVID, why should you come? We need to change the way we teach people. But at the end of the day, it will probably be a blended model,” Goland says.

**Local Collaboration to Support the Vulnerable**

Another key component in Russell Berrie Foundation’s grantmaking approach is connecting with the local community to facilitate collaborations. In the realm of diabetes, for example, a few years ago, the foundation embarked on a new, experimental effort to invest in prevention by creating two community-based initiatives in Bergen County, giving support to Hackensack University Medical Center Foundation and the Bergen Volunteer Medical Initiative.

“How do you build a set of collaborations that have trusted partners around the table and have more of a 360-degree view of the community and individuals?” Salzman says.

More recently, the foundation sought to support a similar kind of local collaboration with a $50,000 grant to Northern New Jersey Community Foundation (NNJCF). The grant aims to support nonprofits working on the front lines with vulnerable communities, along with arts organizations in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.
NNJCF works across six areas: education, health, civic engagement, environment, the arts and philanthropy. It engages in typical community foundation work through donor-advised funds, as well as funds focused on specific topics, and through collaborative funds like its COVID-19 Rapid Response Fund, which awarded nearly $250,000 in May to nonprofit organizations providing direct services to residents in Bergen County. Many of these organizations were small, with operating budgets under a half-million dollars, and typically received $1,000 to $10,000 in grants.

“This is a great time to leverage the community foundation as a driver of some collective impact work, reaching out to smaller organizations in the region that might be overlooked by more large-scale programs,” says Mary Blanusa, NNJCF executive director.

Blanusa explains that when she connected with Berrie Foundation brass earlier in the year, they were adamant that COVID-19 response should help build collaboration across funders and organizations in service of building a larger philanthropic ecosystem. As Blanusa tells it, this collaboration started even as NNJCF was applying for a grant.

NNJCF worked with a smaller organization in Bergen County called the Community Chest to put together an aligned grant application that would allow them to support organizations together.

“This has been a vital resource in other challenging times. Steered by Rabbi Ron Symons, Rev. Liddy Barlow and other... Philanthropy can help unleash and catalyze new resources,” Demmellash says.

Through their work on the ground, Blanusa was convinced of a growing need to address the economic impact of the pandemic, not just the health impact. A component of this $30,000 grant also involves arts organizations, which Blanusa explains are especially vital right now in breaking down isolation and providing people with opportunities for creative engagement remotely, including physical activities like dancing.

“We have to make sure that the grassroots arts community post-pandemic is still healthy. There are business models and livelihoods that have been very impacted by social distancing,” she says.

Overall, Blanusa is hopeful that philanthropy can come together during this challenging time and build the kinds of collaborative funds that will impact more people in the future.

Economic Justice and Interfaith Work, Too

The foundation’s emergency grantmaking includes two other intriguing organizations that illustrate the layered nature of this funder’s giving. Rising Tide Capital received $150,000 for technical assistance and support for small businesses. And the Center for Loving Kindness of the Pittsburgh JCC received $35,000 for its online interfaith network.

Rising Tide Capital in Jersey City was co-founded by Alfa Melesse Demmellash, who was born and raised in Ethiopia and went on to graduate from Harvard University. The organization was founded more than a decade and a half ago with the goal of disrupting multi-generational economic insecurity. “Access to capital was our first focus. We realized, though, that money was one part of a much larger and much more complex issue,” Demmellash told me.

Russell Berrie himself was involved in sales during his career, and one of the foundation’s focuses is on elevating the profession. William Patterson University is home to the Russ Berrie Institute for Professional Sales, which partners with Rising Tide Capital on a training program for low-income entrepreneurs in New Jersey.

During the winter, the Berrie Foundation reached out to Rising Tide Capital after a public shooting in a community that the nonprofit serves, Demmellash says. “They reached out and checked in, but they also initiated a conversation about what could be done... and then, after that, COVID-19 hit within a few weeks. So we’ve been really impressed not just in how they’ve been proactive in funding us, but also supporting us in structuring new partnerships.”

Rising Tide Capital’s Community Business Academy offers a 12-week course in business planning and management, taught in English and Spanish, and serving a population that is 90% people of color. Indeed, the average Rising Tide Capital entrepreneur is a 41-year-old single mother of two. Today, Rising Tide Capital serves 1,000 entrepreneurs per year, operates in six New Jersey cities, and has partnered with an organization on the South Side of Chicago to adopt its core model.

Just as the Berrie Foundation emphasizes finding and empowering leaders, so does Rising Tide Capital. The group’s executive director Gillian Sarjeant-Allen went through the program. Graduate Angela McKnight, meanwhile, runs her own nonprofit working with seniors, is a sitting legislator in the New Jersey Assembly, and an evening instructor at Rising Tide Capital.

“This is the moment for philanthropy, especially those committed to the cause of social justice and what we’ve been calling, along with others, as restorative investing. Now’s the time to hammer it all home... Philanthropy can help unleash and catalyze new resources,” Demmellash says.

The Berrie Foundation’s gift to the Center for Loving Kindness funds a young organization that has already been a vital resource in other challenging times. Steered by Rabbi Ron Symons, Rev. Liddy Barlow and other leaders, the Center for Loving Kindness and the larger JCC provided rescue and other vital services in the...
wake of the Tree of Life Synagogue antisemitic attack in Pittsburgh. The center itself was founded a year earlier, right around the time of the white supremacist attack in Charlottesville.

“The center was formed in the context of the realization that the country was getting more bifurcated. What are the core values of the JCC? ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ and ‘Do not stand idle while your neighbor bleeds.’ But we want to redefine ‘neighbor’ from a geographic term to a moral concept,” Symons explains.

A key aspect of the center is its interfaith network. In the past year, Symons says he connected with Angelica Berrie, who encouraged them to expand their work with other faith leaders nationally. Sofa Spirituality, an online interfaith network, was born out of these conversations. Both Symons and Barlow are convinced that this network is particularly valuable now, but also has legs in a post-pandemic world. “Maybe this is the next version of the hot dish potluck interfaith dinner in the basement of a church,” Symons says with a laugh.

And Barlow notes that while interfaith dialogue has been accessible in urban areas, this isn’t as true in rural contexts, so there’s an opportunity for Sofa Spirituality to touch these more rural communities and allow others to connect, learn, and build community together.

Close to the Ground

Other grantees in the foundation’s first round of emergency funding include organizations supporting elderly populations in Israel, local food banks, and the Israel Science Foundation, which is working on the rapid testing of therapies to combat COVID-19.

If the Russell Berrie Foundation seems particularly nimble and versatile, Salzman credits her on-the-ground staff, who really understand the communities that they serve. Looking ahead, this is likely just the beginning of the Russell Berrie Foundation’s role in tackling this historic health and economic crisis.

“A lot of it is just responding to the day. You feed a hungry person today. But I hope that our engagement will also help us be smarter about how we think about resilience, and how we can help to shape systems going forward that are going to deal with tomorrow and beyond,” Salzman says.