Kerry Olson and Dave Katz launched the Firelight Foundation to support children in Africa affected by HIV, AIDS, and poverty through community-based initiatives.

1999 - 2000

- Firelight issues its first call for proposals
- Firelight partners with the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation to reduce mother-to-child transmission of HIV in Africa

2001

- Firelight provides seed funding for Rory Kennedy’s film Pandemic: Facing AIDS
- Firelight co-hosts meeting in New York City for 28 foundations and NGOs on orphans and vulnerable children in Africa, timed to coincide with the Special Session of the UN General Assembly on HIV/AIDS
- Firelight’s grantmaking focuses on Malawi, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe based on HIV and AIDS rates, level of need, and opportunity for impact
- Firelight receives first public donations from individuals and businesses

2002

- Firelight convenes meeting on “best practices” for orphans and vulnerable children in New York City, bringing together 23 representatives of philanthropic, educational, civic, governmental, and religious organizations
- Lesotho becomes Firelight’s seventh focus country

2003 - 2004

- 100th grant awarded
- Firelight’s grantmaking focuses on Malawi, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe based on HIV and AIDS rates, level of need, and opportunity for impact

2005

- Five-year anniversary events in Cape Town, South Africa, featuring meetings with Archbishop Desmond Tutu and with CBO grantee-partners
- Firelight publishes Promise of a Future advocacy paper to raise awareness about the importance of family and community-based care
- Firelight partners with Bernard van Leer Foundation, International AIDS Alliance, and Teresa Group to form the Coalition for Children Affected by AIDS (CCABA) to increase the visibility of children’s issues at International AIDS Conference
- Firelight receives multi-year grant from Johnson & Johnson and its first grant from American Jewish World Service
- Future Firelight board member Dr. Geoff Foster authors Bottlenecks and Drip-feeds, a report published by Save the Children advocating for more resources to support community-based solutions for orphans and vulnerable children

2003

- Firelight is featured in Council of Foundations publication: Successful Small Grants Programs: When A Little Goes A Long Way (Caroline D. Avery)

2004

- Kerry Olson and Dave Katz receive the Children Affected by AIDS “Ribbon of Dreams” award for founding Firelight to support vulnerable children
- Firelight receives funding from the Flora Family Foundation, the New Field Foundation, and its largest individual donation from an anonymous donor
Firelight publishes From Faith to Action: Strengthening Family and Community-Based Care for Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Sub-Saharan Africa, a guide for faith-based groups and donors, launched at the 16th International AIDS Conference in Toronto.

Firelight is featured in Legacy and Innovation: A Guidebook for Families on Social Change Philanthropy (Stephanie Yang and Changemakers).

Elton John AIDS Foundation and Nike Foundation begin funding Firelight.

Firelight joins the Grassroots Girls Initiative, a consortium of six organizations focused on unleashing the “Girl Effect” – the unique potential of adolescent girls to end poverty for themselves and the world – in Malawi and Rwanda.

18-year-old Julia Feinberg is awarded $6,500 from Make-a-Wish Foundation and chooses to give it all to Firelight.

Firelight begins a long-standing relationship as an umbrella partner to the Tsadik Foundation to support and advocate for the needs and rights of children who are orphaned or affected by HIV and AIDS in Africa.

Firelight conducts a rapid assessment of how the emergency situation in Zimbabwe affects grantee-partners and convenes a “Care for the Caregivers” workshop.

Installation artist, photographer, and social practice artist Naomi Natale (“One Million Bones”) creates the Cradle Project to benefit Firelight – a social practice work designed to draw attention to the 48 million children orphaned and made vulnerable by disease and poverty in Africa. Over 555 cradles were created, representing a wide variety of art forms and sources.

Firelight publishes its 10-year Anniversary Report in celebration of a decade of grantmaking and incorporation as a public charity.

With growing public support, the Firelight Foundation becomes a public charity.

A public Board of Directors is recruited. Kerry Olson and Dave Katz are joined by Jonathan Lewis, Barbara Fagan-Smith, Geoff Foster, and Diana Aubourg Millner.

Firelight launches early childhood development clusters in Zambia and Malawi with support from the Hilton Foundation.

2006
- Firelight program officer Jennifer Anderson-Bahr shares Firelight’s work in Lesotho with Britain’s Prince Harry in London.
  - In Barron’s Magazine’s Special Report on Philanthropy, “Giving Wisely,” Firelight’s work is recognized when founders Kerry Olson and Dave Katz are honored as being among 10 of the most “thoughtful and effective donors in the United States.”
  - Firelight receives its first grant from the ELMA Foundation.

2007
- 1000th grant awarded.
- Firelight co-hosts the Stanford Symposium on Vulnerable Children.
- Firelight convenes three-day meeting on child abuse and child protection in Malawi, attended by 23 grantees from 9 African countries.
- Firelight funds Justice for Children Trust to hold a workshop for all Zimbabwean partners on how to engage in the constitutional revision process to enshrine children’s rights in the constitution.
- Firelight launches a child protection cluster in Lesotho with support from an anonymous donor.

2008
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2009
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2010
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2011
Firelight launches “Innovations in Early Learning” cluster in Tanzania with support from the Hewlett Foundation
Oak Foundation begins funding Firelight’s child protection work in Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia
Firelight launches its unique organizational development tool to measure increases in community-based organizational capacity

2012
Hilton Foundation funds Firelight to expand early childhood development clusters to Tanzania (in addition to Zambia and Malawi)
Oak Foundation begins funding Firelight’s child protection cluster in Lesotho

2015
Firelight launches ending child marriage cluster in Shinyanga, Tanzania, with support from the Wellspring Philanthropic Fund and the Oak Foundation
Firelight launches CBO grantee-partner cluster to improve early childhood development center quality in Malawi with the support of the Bainum Family Foundation
Under the Partnership for Innovations in Secondary Education (PSIPSE) Firelight launches girls’ secondary education cluster in Malawi with support from Dubai Cares and the MasterCard Foundation

2016
Executive Director Nina Blackwell presents local-focused focused philanthropy at two panels at the Global Forum of Development at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
Flora Family Foundation supports Firelight to deepen impact in girls’ secondary education cluster in Malawi
Executive Director Nina Blackwell authors an article in a special edition of Alliance Magazine dedicated to community philanthropy

2017
Firelight secures a planning grant for its early childhood development clusters in Zambia, Malawi, and Tanzania with support from the Hilton Foundation
Firelight expands its ending child marriage cluster in Shinyanga, Tanzania, to Malawi with support from the Pathy Family Foundation
Firelight publishes “The Quality of Learning and Care at Community-Based Early Childhood Development Centers in Malawi” in the Global Education Review
Firelight deepens its impact in early childhood development in Malawi, Zambia, and Tanzania with the support of Comic Relief
Firelight deepens its impact in ending child marriage in Shinyanga, Tanzania, with the support of the Dorothea Haus Ross Foundation
Firelight hosts Mrs. Graça Machel, former first lady of Mozambique and South Africa, at an event about amplifying the voices of women and children in Africa
Firelight conducts extensive 9-country research into real capacity-building needs of community-based organizations

2018
Firelight supports 23 community-based organizations across Zambia, Malawi, and Tanzania to strengthen early childhood development outcomes in their communities, with support from the Hilton Foundation, Bainum Family Foundation, and Comic Relief.

Firelight launches new 5-year strategy (2020-2025) after period of reviewing learnings from exited initiatives across Africa.

Firelight partners with expert African researchers and community leaders to develop comprehensive, community-informed research studies exploring the realities of children’s rights and wellbeing in Zambia, Tanzania, and Malawi.

Firelight launches two new clusters of organizations working on early childhood development outcomes in Malawi and Zambia, with support from the Hilton Foundation.

Firelight joins the #ShiftThePower movement to decolonize global development funding and take an approach of solidarity (vs. charity) with CBO grantee-partners.

Firelight Program Officer Carolyne Ng’eny is elected to the Board for the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), representing the first time that a community-centered grantmaker has been elected to the GPE Board.

Firelight launches its pivotal report, Community-Driven Systems Change: the power of grassroots-led change for long-term impact and how funders can nurture it, as well as a set of tools for funders to use when applying this approach.

COVID-19 has a profound impact on CBOs across eastern and southern Africa – in response, Firelight raises a $700K COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund to make rapid, unrestricted grants to CBOs on the frontlines in Rwanda, Malawi, Zambia, and Tanzania.

Firelight establishes country-wide networking calls and WhatsApp groups for all grantees in each country to assist with inter-grantee connection, connection to other civil society organizations, knowledge sharing, and information gathering.

Firelight launches new cluster of organizations in Malawi working to address the root causes of child marriage, with support from the Pathy Family Foundation.

Firelight completes research and analysis on community-driven systems change, an endeavor that began in 2017.

Executive Director Nina Blackwell begins process of transitioning Firelight towards African leadership, in recognition of the organization’s journey of transformation to shift power and decolonize the organization’s practices.

Firelight launches a youth resiliency and belonging cluster in Kenya with support from Imaginable Futures.

Firelight publishes research on community-driven systems change in peer-reviewed journal Development in Practice, authored by Dr. Sadaf Shallwani and academic and CBO collaborators (titled: “Community-based organisations and child well-being in sub-Saharan Africa: defining social change, effectiveness, and success”)

Firelight receives $10 million gift from MacKenzie Scott, allowing the organization to invest in its long-term vision and strategy.