

WF 40th Anniversary Celebration

Four Decades, A Narrative

As of May 5, 2026



Introduction

I want to help you remember the past. I want to highlight the response and action taken by the Women's Fund. I want you to feel the value, the impact, and the opportunity that this organization is and represents.

There is no simple explanation to what four decades has created or changed. It is a collection of actions, investments, decisions, and moments. Think of it like a rock dropped in water. The Women's Fund is the rock. What you are about to hear...the people, the lives, and the programs...that is the ripple, the Women's Fund Ripple.

Some of you lived these years as adults, fully present in the moments I am about to describe. Others may be hearing some of this history for the first time.

Think of the Women's Fund for what it is...a movement. A movement dedicated to gender equity. And let us be clear about what that means...this isn't about the people over there, the ones who may need food, clothing, shelter or support is some other way. This is about you and me. What we absorb. How we see the world. Who we support. And what we expect for ourselves, and for the community we call home. We are the change, and the change makers, we are the movement...

So here we go...four decades of mission work.

Decade One 1986 to 1990s, and we know it is more than a decade, though go with us...it was the period when the Women's Fund got started and established itself.

It is 1986.

Ronald Reagan is President. The Space Shuttle Challenger has just exploded in the sky, taking with it Christa McAuliffe, a teacher...a woman...and one of the few that traveled in space. The Iran-Contra affair is breaking in the news. And in Milwaukee, a city of beer and motorcycles, of Miller Brewing and Harley-Davidson, a city where steel and manufacturing are beginning to sunset...women are earning, on average, sixty-four cents for every dollar a man makes.

This is the decade immediately following the 70s when so much changed for women...from access to abortion, college, sports, credit and capital...rights and opportunities for women were making headway.

The world is stirring. Just one year earlier, in 1985, EMILY's List had launched, the first major political action committee dedicated to electing pro-choice Democratic women. Geraldine Ferraro had just made history as the first woman on a major party presidential ticket.

Women were organizing.

And in Greater Milwaukee, under what was then called The Milwaukee Foundation, a group of women inspired by the national women's foundation movement decided that philanthropy could and needed to do better for women. They believed that women, when empowered with resources and a voice, could improve their own lives, lift families, strengthen neighborhoods, and transform entire communities.

But first, they had to change how women thought about their own power.

This was a heavy lift. At that time, most charitable giving aligned with men, the organizations they led, the causes they chose. Judy Murphy, the Women's Fund's first Board Chair, recalls that when some women were asked to give, their first response was that they needed to discuss it with their husbands. That was the thinking the Fund was determined to influence. The Fund was designed to be by women, for women, with women making philanthropic decisions themselves and directing resources in their own interest.

Like any new entity, the first Board of Directors was created, the first Executive Director hired. And the local Fund joined the national movement

though membership of the Women's Funding Network. To this day, this international network leverages connection. The value here is that this makes the Women's Fund part of something big and at the same time, the Women's Fund is informed by something big.

For example, during the pandemic, the Women's Funding Network distributed the hand signal for "help"...you may know it from the ads, a hand is displayed, four fingers up and then thumb is folded in and then the fingers wrap over it. This symbol was developed by Women's Fund of Canada...and introduced, and then distributed by all the Women's Funds and Foundations in the Women's Funding Network. The power of a life-saving measure was introduced in one virtual meeting, and rippled immediately to millions, ultimately becoming a valuable signal used by women and girls everywhere.

Ok, back to those early days...

From the Milwaukee Foundation archives, we know early grants financed programs that encouraged the advancement and full participation of women and girls in society. The priorities were clear: prevent violence against women and girls, promote health, and build economic self-sufficiency.

Also, during this first decade, the HER Scholarship Program was born, and the story of how it started is worth telling.

Annette Stoddard-Freedman was suddenly widowed, and suddenly back in the workforce, with four children in K through 12 schools. She realized her college degree made the difference. It opened doors others wouldn't have. That realization became a seed...she and Sally Grootemaat, a good friend, funded the start of what is today a cornerstone of the Women's Fund: the HER Scholarship Program, multi-year scholarships designed for women thirty-five and older, pursuing their first college degree.

And to understand what that scholarship means, meet Latrice, a current HER Scholar.

She was in her mid-thirties, a single mother of four, when she decided to go back to school. Her children watched. They stepped up. And she pushed

them to understand who they are and that their purpose in this world is bigger than themselves.

There were hard stretches. Grief. A period without a car, catching buses to get herself to campus and her kids to school.

Today, this academic year, she is studying public health, on track to graduate in 2027, with plans to pursue a master's in public policy. She wants to understand systems, how laws work, how policy shapes health, who it reaches and who it leaves out.

The degree journey has changed how she thinks. How she decides. She makes choices now with her future in mind.

We are confident that Annette, and every donor who has followed her, would be proud to hear about Latrice's fortitude...her drive to finish and keep going with her education.

This is not charity. It is investment.

By the end of this first decade, the Women's Fund had become more than a Grantmaker, and Scholarship giver. It had become a convener, holding Women and Public Policy luncheons that drew more than a thousand people annually. A chance for powerful elected officials to mix/mingle in community with a focus on women.

The Fund had become a connector, introducing people to others beyond their typical circles. It was a chance to better understand each other, and the obstacles in the way.

The Fund had become a conscience for the region...it was calling attention to inequity and insisting the community act.

Decade Two | 2000s

The year 2000 arrived...Y2K had come and gone with a whimper. The dot-com era was cresting. And in Milwaukee, the Women's Fund was entering a new chapter, one defined by strategic clarity, growing impact, and an unwavering commitment to systemic change.

Women represented forty-six percent of the U.S. workforce, yet remained dramatically underrepresented in corporate boardrooms and c-suites, government, and nonprofit leadership. The women's funding movement was responding with data, with advocacy, and with new language for the work: gender equity.

Our local fund understood early what researchers would later confirm. When you disaggregate data by gender, by race, and by zip code, the true landscape of inequality comes into focus. When Wisconsin received a C in the first Status of Women report, it was a map...a call to action rendered in numbers.

On the national stage, 2005 brought Condoleezza Rice as the first Black woman to serve as U.S. Secretary of State. In 2007, Nancy Pelosi became the first woman to serve as Speaker of the US House of Representatives... the highest-ranking woman in the history of American government.

Yet, progress in the halls of Washington DC power did not reach the kitchen table. Milwaukee was experiencing significant economic stress, particularly in communities of color, where women were disproportionately bearing the burden of poverty, housing instability, and under-resourced schools.

The Women's Fund acted...

Some of the investments of the era became something more than grants. They became institutions. Seed funding is risky. One bets on what something could become, long before the results are known. Milwaukee Muslim Women's Coalition, Pearls for Teen Girls, and Sojourner, all examples of community anchors today.

The Women's Fund does not operate these organizations and never has. What it did was believe in them early on...before others had reason to, and made grants to support their ideas, their work, and the women in our community. Traditional funders often want proof, data, track records, demonstrated outcomes. The Women's Fund understood that sometimes, important investments happen before the proof exists. What these organizations are in 2026 is what early belief looks like, decades later.

That kind of commitment is only possible because of you and your participation in collective philanthropy. When donors pool resources and trust the judgment of an organization deeply rooted in this community, the Women's Fund can say yes when it matters most.

Elaine Maly, Executive Director during this period, shepherded several defining achievements: a one-million-dollar infusion into the grant pool, the establishment of the Women's Fund as its own independent entity, and the opening of an office in the Third Ward, where the Fund still is today. Under her leadership, the Fund secured two seven-figure federal grants focused on reproductive justice, organizing women, girls, and their communities to challenge structural inequalities and link the personal to the political.

Elaine also launched giving circles, each anchored with contributions matched by the Kellogg Foundation. Donors in the Hmong, Latina, and lesbian communities pooled resources and each advanced solutions rooted in their lived experience. In 2026, the Hmong giving circle moved on...now it will operate under a statewide fiscal sponsor with broader reach. We are proud to be where it all started.

The Women's Fund closed the decade with a larger endowment, a stronger network, and a sharpened sense of purpose. The question was no longer whether women's philanthropy was necessary. The question was: how much further could we go?

Decade Three | 2010s

The 2010s would reshape how America talks about women, power, and justice. The Women's Fund entered the decade with a maturing strategy, grounded in the conviction that the most effective philanthropy doesn't just respond to problems. It changes the conditions that create them.

In Milwaukee, one of the most racially segregated cities in America, the gaps between white women and women of color in education, income, health outcomes, and political power were stark and persistent.

Margaret Henningsen, the Fund's third Executive Director, followed a newly written strategic plan that gave shape to the work. A big part of her work...was that Grant Partners received more than funding. They received her presence. New executive directors at both emerging and established organizations found in the Women's Fund a place to build skills, forge networks, and access to other funders. This was capacity-building before it became a buzzword, the quiet, unglamorous work of making the whole ecosystem stronger...and Margaret was doing it.

Nationally...in 2013, the U.S. military lifted its ban on women in combat roles. In 2016, Hillary Rodham Clinton became the first woman nominated for President by a major American political party. Millions of girls watched and understood, perhaps for the first time, that the highest office in the land was not for men only.

The Women's March in January 2017 brought an estimated four million people into the streets, the largest single-day demonstration in American history. The Women's Fund convened a response, hosting its first Community Talk Back, a panel of women who had marched in Washington DC, in Arizona, in Georgia, in Minnesota, even in London, bringing their experiences home and into conversation.

One woman, Emily was on assignment...her march had been funded and organized by the Women's Fund and a collaborating partner. We didn't know it at the time, but Emily was transforming while she was documenting this day in history. She had experienced personal trauma and had avoided being out in the world by herself, yet she found the courage to take this assignment. Upon her return, she boasted about her confidence and thanked the Women's Fund for the opportunity to start anew. She had never shared her story publicly, though that Demin Day in April she did...so others would find the strength she did...to move forward and thrive. Since then, Emily finished her Masters program and even went on to earned a PhD...she is working in Greater Milwaukee.

In 2017, the movie *HIDDEN FIGURES* was on the big screen and had received several Academy Award nominations...so the Women's Fund acted. We organized a Community Talk Back in partnership with MSOE, we

invited the STEM students from Saint Joan Antita High School. We confirmed panel that included a nurse, an engineer, and a scientist to talk about what in the movie resonated for them and what had changed.

That same year, Jordan attended the Women's Fund Community Book Read of *When Everything Changed*. She arrived ready to listen to the multi-generational panel. She left changed. On the way home, she stopped for dinner. Not because it was a special occasion, but because she could. Because something in her had shifted about what she took for granted...her aha moment was that it was socially unacceptable for women to go to the bar or restaurant by herself. Jordan had taken that for granted so...in honor of what others before her had persevered and she wanted to celebrate what was possible. That is what this work looks like up close...may seem small at first glance. However, Jordan is now a mother, raising children. Even though this was years ago, it is likely this aha moment is still stirring in Jordan.

These are Emily and Jordan's stories...we believe there are hundreds more like them...hundreds more ripples in the movement, created by a Women's Fund program.

Later in the year, the Women's Fund marked the forty-fifth anniversary of Title IX, honoring the thirty-seven words that transformed access to education and athletics for generations of girls and women. As keynote speaker for the Women's Fund Presents program, Donna Orender reminded the room: those words were powerful in the day and are still relevant.

And we can say they are relevant in 2026 as well, they continue to guide response to campus sexual assault, they are at the center of the national debate over athlete policies, and in the "name, image and likeness" era, they are questioning the equity in programs about opportunities, facilities, coaching, and recruiting...in ways that go far beyond playing the game or sport.

It was the Women's Fund to celebrate the importance of Title IX well after it was accepted into law and continues to reference its value.

Then came the MeToo movement which ended decades of silence about sexual assault and harassment. The Women's Fund moved quickly, organizing a Community Talk Back to unpack the legal language around sexual assault and rape, partnering with TEMPO Milwaukee to surface and share data on how corporate Milwaukee was responding, and creating space for conversation across the community when things felt overwhelming and the path forward wasn't yet clear.

I was on that panel. My lens was media, in this case social media gave MeToo movement its momentum, amplifying voices that had been systematically ignored and making it impossible for institutions to look away. I remember sharing the responsibility of media to XXXXXX.

The Women's Fund understood the moment and that it needed exploration, community, and connection.

Decade Four | 2020s

When it started, no one quite knew what 2020 would become.

A pandemic that would claim over a million lives in the US. A racial justice uprising, sparked by the murder of George Floyd, that shook the nation's conscience. An economic collapse that, as every crisis does, hit women hardest, and Black and Brown women hardest of all.

Researchers called it the She-cession. Women, particularly mothers, left the workforce at staggering rates as childcare collapsed around them. Essential workers, overwhelmingly women, overwhelmingly women of color, kept the rest of us alive while remaining underpaid and unprotected.

The Women's Fund was certain in the uncertainty. It moved quickly with Women's Fund Flash Grants to get resources to organizations on the front lines: those supporting survivors of family violence whose perpetrators were now home around the clock, those providing food security for families, and those helping women entrepreneurs navigate the wreckage.

After the Dobbs decision that overruled Roe, again the Women's Fund responded. This time by convening...a Board Director underwrote the

reception...there were experts, one to talk about the legal landscape the new US Supreme Court created, another to talk about the healthcare resources. There was a 2 for 1 challenge that generated nearly \$20,000 in emergency support of reproductive care so women could access services in Illinois. It was collective philanthropy that responded.

In this fourth decade, advocacy is a focus as is civic engagement.

We believe the Women's Fund community is a voting community...people vote, we know that. Our Community Talk Backs and Civic Breaks provide insight and inspiration. The experts help us frame the impact of issues and elections on women...they provide valuable facts to support conversation for us to have with family, friends, colleagues and in the community.

We shine the light on the fragility of our rights, our democracy and give attendees and participants permission and confidence to inform others, be sure others know what is at stake.

We believe that we can, collectively, protect and shape what happens in Wisconsin. For example, marriage equity, granting the right for same gender marriages happened with a decision by the US Supreme Court on June 26, 2015 with a 5/4 vote. The composition of the Court is different now...however, rights can be protected by our state constitution. This is why understanding who is running for office, what issues will be considered is the work we need to be doing.

In 2024 and 2025, the Women's Fund joined Women's Fund of Fox Valley and partners in Rhode Island and California to create the Women's Well-Being Index. The co-created narratives for Greater Milwaukee and Wisconsin were distributed to elected officials, business leaders, and community leaders as both a resource and a reminder, and a challenge that the lived experiences of women in our community and our state be seen, and acted upon.

And there is Linda. After attending a Women's Fund Presents program in 2025 about the Science of Happiness, she left inspired and redirected. Her goal shifted from fine artist to art therapist. She is now enrolling at Mount

Mary University. One program. One evening. One woman's entire trajectory...changed.

In 2026...we continue the tradition of Women's Fund Presents and this year invited a leading expert to talk about Artificial Intelligence...the ethics, equity and the future.

The Women's Fund organizes casual meet ups called Laundry Nights, we have robust collaborations for experiences like, Lightning Talks, and Women's Night at the Theater. These are opportunities for women to use their voice, amplify our lived-experiences, cross pollinate communities, and build friendships.

Closing

As I close, you can read data points about the National landscape in 2026 on page 16 of the printed program, here are a few that are related specifically to Wisconsin...

According to recent data published by Milwaukee Women inc...women's representation on boards of directors both of Wisconsin public and private companies has inched forward, while other indicators signal stagnation of slight declines.

Here is the data...

- 100% of public companies in Wisconsin have at least one director who is a woman.
- Only 30%, 141 of 459 board directors in public companies in Wisconsin are women.
- And...only 6%, 27 of 459 board directors in public companies in Wisconsin are women of color.

In recently published data by the Wisconsin Women's Council...since Wisconsin achieved statehood in 1848, women have made limited gains in public leadership at the federal and statewide levels. In over 177 years...

Federal Offices

- 1 woman has served in the U.S. Senate
- 2 women have served in the U.S. House of Representatives

Statewide Executive Offices

- No woman has ever been elected Governor
- 4 women have served as Lieutenant Governor
- 1 woman has served as Attorney General
- 2 women have served as Secretary of State
- 4 women have served as State Treasurer
- 4 women have served as Superintendent of Public Instruction

Supreme Court

- 11 women have served on the Wisconsin Supreme Court

Over the past two decades, women in Wisconsin have made measurable but modest progress toward equality in elected office. While some branches of government, most notably the judiciary, show substantial gains, women remain underrepresented across most elected positions, particularly in executive and local offices. Taken as a whole, the data from 2005 to 2025 illustrate incremental improvement rather than transformative change, underscoring the persistence of structural and cultural barriers to women's political power.

The work of a Women's Fund is not a sprint. It is a marathon, requiring strength, endurance, and an unshakeable commitment to keep going even when the finish line isn't visible. It is also an inheritance. A gift we give to women who are girls today, and to those not yet born, for the issues and possibilities we haven't yet imagined, in a city that by 2040 will be unrecognizable in the best possible way.

We are in the reality of life for women in 2026...and through the Women's Fund, we get to influence what 2040 becomes for ourselves, our families and our community.

Thank you.

