



# CLIMATE CONNECTION

Before the term “climate change” became commonplace, The Heinz Endowments supported a range of environmental organizations for decades. Many of the groups helped form the basis of the foundation’s eventual climate-focused environmental agenda.  
By Don Hopey

## Hurricane Michael was a dangerous and destructive Category 5 storm with sustained winds of 160 miles per hour when it made landfall on the Florida panhandle in October 2018. It also blew through Tallahassee, destroying the home of Lily Jarosz's cousin.

Ms. Jarosz, 18, of Irwin, Pennsylvania, a community 27 miles southeast of Pittsburgh, said the Tallahassee storm and other recent severe weather that's hit the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico, where her grandparents were born, sparked her awareness of the impacts of global climate change and her determination to do something about it.

"I chose to become active in the climate change movement mostly because I am Puerto Rican, and I know that the Puerto Rican people have gone through so much when it comes to repeated flooding and storms that are also exacerbated by climate change," said Ms. Jarosz, who graduated from Norwin High School last spring and plans to spend a "gap year" in Puerto Rico learning about sustainable agriculture.

She's a member of the Alliance for Climate Education and Communitopia, two organizations that work to engage and educate high school-age climate advocates and are among the more than two dozen groups focused on various climate-related issues that receive grant support from The Heinz Endowments. The nonprofits also represent part of the evolution in the foundation's strategy to address threats to the environment and human health using a climate change lens.

At the outset of its environmental philanthropy in the 1990s, the Endowments supported organizations working to reduce

polluting emissions from coal mining, coal-burning electric power plants and heavy industry that have adversely affected the region's communities, environment and public health for generations. Philip Johnson, the Endowments' senior program director for Environment & Health, said that, over the last 10 years, grantmaking has gradually shifted and recently grown as the link between those carbon emissions and a warming planet has become more closely tied and more clearly and scientifically recognized as a prime driver of the global climate crisis.

"When I came to Pittsburgh 12 years ago, fracking in the Marcellus Shale had started but no one was paying much attention. The problems however — for the environment, air quality, public health — were already out of the box," Dr. Johnson said. "They weren't framed as climate change issues. They were framed as local health and environmental issues. But the immediate impacts of climate change over the last few years have become really hard to ignore."

By October 2017, when Endowments funding brought Al Gore's Climate Reality Project to Pittsburgh for three days of climate education and grassroots organizing, people were ready to talk about climate change in a way that recognized the region's contribution to it and validated the work done to address it, Dr. Johnson said.

Although its industry has dwindled, Pennsylvania remains the third-largest coal-producing state (behind Wyoming and West Virginia) and, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, ranked second to Texas in natural gas production in 2020. The Keystone State also ranked second to Texas in total energy production in 2019, and fourth (behind Texas, California and Florida) in emissions of carbon dioxide, a heat-trapping greenhouse gas, in 2018, which were the latest years for which those totals are available on the U.S. Energy Information Administration website.

Dr. Johnson said that the Endowments, over the past two decades, has supported the building of local, regional and national organizations and networks to address the

region's "outsized pollution impacts." That infrastructure has enabled it to refocus its energy on efforts to control emissions of climate-altering pollutants, including carbon dioxide, nitrogen oxides, methane, black carbon, and hazardous and volatile organic compounds.

"Our grantmaking has changed over the past decades to reflect those priorities, as well as to help elevate them," Dr. Johnson said. "And while the focus should be on the individuals and groups doing the work, it sometimes takes philanthropy to move the needle."

### Combining long-term support with new investments

Since 2010, the Endowments' annual grantmaking for its environmental and health programs has ranged from \$8.5 million to \$14.5 million, leveling off recently to about \$10.5 million and including contributions from its Sustainability, Learning and Creativity programs.

During the past decade, grants targeting climate work went to more than two dozen organizations. Part of that list reads like a who's who of local, regional and statewide environmental education and advocacy organizations, and includes the Group Against Smog and Pollution, the Breathe Project, the Green Building Alliance, PennFuture, the Sierra Club, the League of Women Voters PA, Mountain Watershed Association, the Center for Coalfield Justice, PennEnvironment, the Clean Air Council, the Environmental Integrity Project, the Clean Water Fund, Carnegie Mellon University's CREATE Lab, the FracTracker Alliance, and the Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project.

A number of newer, smaller or lesser known organizations have also received support from the Endowments, including Communitopia, the Alliance for Climate Education, the Alliance for Climate Protection, Creatives for Climate / Sustainability Pioneers, Energy Efficiency Alliance, the Ohio River Valley Institute, Project Drawdown, Reimagine Appalachia, the Rocky Mountain Institute, and Solar United.



The Endowments' support of the Group Against Smog and Pollution began about 20 years ago, when the Pittsburgh-based grassroots group was already 30 years old, said Rachel Filippini, GASP's former executive director. But the foundation's grants over the years were important in growing the once all-volunteer group into one that has seven paid staffers and an expanded program menu that today includes watchdog, legal policy and educational work. "It's safe to say that the funding support from Heinz has been important to moving the ball forward on air quality issues," said Ms. Filippini, who stepped down from her leadership position in September. "We have good, diverse support from a number of foundations and even government groups, but Heinz's support has been absolutely critical."

For some organizations, that support has been more foundational. The Endowments was a co-founder of the Coalition to End Childhood Lead Poisoning, which no longer exists, and more recently helped establish FracTracker, Women for a Healthy Environment and the Environmental Health Project.

"No one was doing any research on the health impacts of fracking and shale gas development," EHP Executive Director Alison Steele said of the time before her group started. "The state Department of Health was doing nothing. We needed to get boots on the ground, just like during any health crisis, to figure out what was going on with public health and the shale gas industry's impacts."

She explained that in recent years, as dozens of peer-reviewed studies have shown correlations between living near shale gas development sites and a host of human health problems, her organization's focus has shifted to development of public health data, preventing exposure and engaging more with public health agencies on policy.

"Our recommendations are informed by a fact-based analysis of what is known and not known," Ms. Steele said. "We can point to gold-standard research that forms the foundation of our work and demonstrates that calling for health protections around shale gas development is a more than reasonable and overdue approach."

As a result, the Environmental Health Project has provided a crucial bridge between

## ▶ GASP

Before she became a member of Pittsburgh City Council, the late Michelle Madoff, right, was a co-founder of the nonprofit organization Group Against Smog and Pollution.



Photo courtesy of GASP



Joshua Franzos



## combating CLIMATE CHANGE

For the past decade, The Heinz Endowments has been awarding grants that address climate change to more than two dozen organizations, including a range of local, regional and statewide environmental education, grassroots and advocacy groups.

### ▲ Climate Reality

The Climate Reality Project, founded by former U.S. Vice President Al Gore, above, conducted a three-day training conference in Pittsburgh in October 2017 that was funded by The Heinz Endowments. Nearly 1,400 people from more than 130 countries participated in the event led by Mr. Gore, leading environmental scientists and professional communicators.

### ◀ Communitopia

Woodland Hills High School juniors Dove Hughey, far left; Grace Moon, center left; and Levi McGraw-Sapp, right, joined Margeaux Everhart, center right, the school's Climate Action team adviser, for a tree-planting activity at the school in October. The project was planned in partnership with the youth environmental group Communitopia and Tree Pittsburgh's One Tree Per Child program.

the science on shale gas industry impacts and the advocacy for more protective practices.

### Promoting healthier towns and cities

**S**iri Lawson, who calls herself “the Brine Lady,” has battled for years against the environmentally damaging but widespread practice of spraying shale gas drilling and fracking wastewater on dirt roads to keep the dust down in rural areas of the state. She credits the support of FracTracker, Environmental Health Project, and Fair Shake Environmental Legal Services with helping her get the word out about health problems the practice caused where she lives in Farmington Township, Warren County, about 148 miles north of Pittsburgh.

The township stopped spraying brine on the roads in 2018 after Ms. Lawson appealed the state Department of Environmental Protection permit that allowed it to do so. The department stopped the practice statewide and admitted in documents it filed with a state Environmental Hearing Board in response to Ms. Lawson’s appeal that the road application of drilling wastewater should be subject to stricter permitting provisions. A loophole in state regulations has allowed it to continue in many areas of the state, even though an August 2021 Pennsylvania State University study found the wastewater to be ineffective at suppressing dust and that it can be harmful to human health, adjacent farms and nearby streams.

“I’ve been yelling about this in the darkness for years, but no one knew about those fights. The environmental organizations have helped me tell my story about the health and environmental impacts of spreading brine,” said Ms. Lawson, who suffers from eye, ear, skin and lung diseases, all, she contends, caused or magnified by the dust. “Without the foundation funding these environmental groups received, there would be no one to push back against the industry. They play a pivotal role.”

Founded by attorney Emily Collins in 2013, Fair Shake is headquartered in Pittsburgh and has offices in Philadelphia and Cleveland. It provides legal representation to individuals and community groups on a wide range of local and regional environmental issues.

Ms. Collins, who serves as Fair Shake’s executive director and managing attorney, said that about 60 percent of the nonprofit law firm’s work is helping individuals like Ms. Lawson resolve local environmental harms cases, while the remainder is representing community groups formed around municipal issues.

For example, Fair Shake represented the North Braddock Residents for Our Future in opposition to a shale gas well pad proposed for U. S. Steel Corp.’s Edgar Thomson Works property that straddles the North Versailles–East Pittsburgh border (the steelmaker eventually backed off the proposal).

“The role we play in the region is one of pursuing our clients’ environmental goals,” Ms. Collins said. “We get a lot of calls about environmental harms already happening. At those times, the office feels like an emergency room.”

The Endowments funded the legal organization’s startup and, along with a handful of other foundations, continues to provide meaningful support today, Ms. Collins said.

“Heinz made Fair Shake happen.”

### Educating the next generation

**T**he Endowments also made Communitopia happen. The organization, which started in a coffee shop in 2009 as the Citizens Climate Corps, was run by volunteers until last year. Now, with Endowments funding, the tiny, youth-oriented nonprofit with one-and-a-half paid positions, has big aspirations about reducing greenhouse gas pollution, slowing climate change and fostering resilient communities.

In 2019, Communitopia provided a climate change workshop to an eighth-grade science class in the Woodland Hills School District, which includes several suburban communities east of Pittsburgh. The organization worked with the students and the Woodland Hills Climate Action Team, part of the Pittsburgh Youth for Climate Action program, to urge the district to add climate science to its curriculum. In July of that year, the school board adopted a resolution to that effect that also calls on state and federal lawmakers to take actions to combat climate change and commits the school district to developing

climate-friendly policies and adopting green design standards.

Woodland Hills is the first, and so far only, school district in the state to adopt such a climate action plan, although more than 50 districts have done so nationwide.

“We want to take what is happening at Woodland Hills and scale it for the region — take a process that seems complicated and make it simpler,” said Katie Modic, Communitopia’s executive director and a former teacher.

Ms. Modic recognizes that school districts have many competing priorities and little incentive to address climate change without state policies requiring them to do so, but she praised Woodland Hills as “brave and forward-thinking to do what it did.”

“If you believe that the job of our schools is to nurture our children and prepare them for the world, then the schools really are obligated to address this issue,” she said.

Alina Zaidi, 17, who lives 17 miles north of Pittsburgh in the suburb of Franklin Park, picked up on that obligation after visiting her grandparents two years ago in New Delhi, India, where the air pollution was so bad the family had to wear face masks when they went outside. And that was in pre-COVID times.

“There was frequent flooding in the area, severe heat and regular power outages. That was all a complete shock to me as it was nothing like what I’d experienced in Pittsburgh,” said Ms. Zaidi, a senior at North Allegheny High School. “That made me realize how real, dangerous and foreseeable climate change is.”

A year ago, she joined Communitopia and Pittsburgh Youth for Climate Action where she met other climate-motivated youth and started the nonprofit Sustainability In Our Schools, which seeks to promote education about climate-change awareness for elementary and middle school students. Pennsylvania is one of four states without approved standards for teaching about climate change and its man-made causes.

“We believe that by changing the mindset of young students and helping them grow up with a belief in the importance of sustainability,” Ms. Zaidi said, “they will subconsciously make sustainable decisions for the rest of their lives, helping our planet.” **h**