



# HIGHLANDER EDUCATION FOUNDATION

2025 Annual Report

[www.HighlanderEducationFoundation.org](http://www.HighlanderEducationFoundation.org)

## MISSION STATEMENT

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The mission of the Highlander Education Foundation is to provide funding for the West Milford, NJ Public School system – particularly for at-risk programs and novel, innovative ideas – by hosting fundraising events and soliciting sponsorships from the community. Through its committees, the Foundation also advocates at the local, county, and state levels for the best interests of West Milford public school students.



## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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**Cortney Stephenson**  
**MA, Foundation President**

Cortney has called West Milford home for the past 18 years, where she and her husband, Joe, are raising their three children. From 2019 to 2021, Cortney served as a Board of Education Trustee for the West Milford BOE, demonstrating her commitment to education in the community.

Actively engaged in her children's education, Cortney regularly participates in school events and volunteers for PTA/PTO sponsored activities. She holds a Master's Degree in Elementary Education and is currently pursuing a second Master's in Educational Leadership. Cortney is in her twenty-first year as a teacher in a neighboring community. With her strong educational background and expertise in school funding, Cortney is dedicated to leveraging her knowledge to foster positive growth within the Highlander Education Foundation. Cortney is hopeful and excited to see how the HEF enhances our local school community.



**Lisa Johnson**  
**MS, Foundation Vice President**

Lisa is raising two children in West Milford with her husband of seventeen years, Bob, who is a lifelong resident of West Milford. Her children attend West Milford High School and Macopin Middle School and are graduates of Marshall Hill and Apshawa, respectively.

First in her family to earn a Bachelors and a Masters degree, she knows firsthand how important a person's education is to creating a positive life trajectory.

Lisa's career in nonprofit management and fundraising has provided her with opportunities for success in both private and public higher education, and large, complex health systems. She holds a Bachelors degree in Political Science from William Paterson University, her Masters Degree in Nonprofit Management from Columbia University, and a Project Management Certificate from Rutgers Business School. She is dedicated to volunteering her skills to create meaningful opportunities for the students of West Milford.

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## BOARD OF DIRECTORS



**Marisa Gough**  
PT, DPT, CLT, Foundation Treasurer

Marisa is a mother of two, a wife, an avid runner, and an advocate for her community. She grew up in Jefferson Township, graduated Kean University in 2010 with her B.A. in Biology, and then went on to complete her doctorate at UMDNJ in 2012. She is now a certified lymphedema therapist, and board certified in oncology. She has experience in speaking at Medical Grand Rounds, Tumor Boards, participating in multiple community outreach events, and is currently working on a prospective research study across multiple hospital sites.

She married her high school sweetheart, Matt, in 2015 after moving to West Milford to start a family. She has since come to know and love the town that she calls home. She loves it for its natural beauty, and for its residents that show what true community means. Once her daughter started elementary school, she soon found out what financial hardships her town was facing. The public schools were being hit hard by budget cuts, cost of living was rising, and restaurants were closing. One motto Marisa lives by is “be the change you wish to see.” Things do not change unless you act, and that is exactly what she plans to do with the Highlander Education Foundation. She hopes to bring a POSITIVE change to the community that she fell in love with.



**Christina G. Duffy**  
CTFA, AEP<sup>®</sup>, MBA, Foundation Secretary

Christina has lived in West Milford for nearly 20 years and currently has children in our district at both the middle school and elementary school levels. She has served in various positions on her children’s elementary school PTA executive board for the last 5 years and is passionate about ensuring the children of West Milford have access to the best resources possible to pave the way toward a successful future. Her goal in working with the Highlander Education Foundation is to support collaboration with the West Milford Board of Education to stabilize “at risk” programs for the benefit of not only our children but all of our town residents.

Christina is a seasoned professional with 20+ years of experience in the private wealth management industry. She earned her undergraduate degree in Psychology from Montclair State University and her MBA from Northeastern University. Christina maintains a Certified Trust and Fiduciary Advisor (CTFA) designation and has been named an Accredited Estate Planner<sup>®</sup> (AEP<sup>®</sup>) by the National Association of Estate Planners and Councils.

## FUNDRAISING EVENTS

### HARLEM WIZARDS BASKETBALL GAME

March 8, 2025

It was a wonderful night full of laughter and fun! The Wizards faced off with the teachers. It was like a Broadway show on the basketball court. We raised \$20,000. We are looking forward to hosting the Wizards again in spring of 2027.



### SPONSORS

#### SUPPORT SPONSORS



#### A SPECIAL THANKS

Thank you to our student and family volunteers who made this event a big hit!

## FUNDRAISING EVENTS

### WEST MILFORD FOOD TRUCK FESTIVAL

July 12, 2025

The festival was filled with music, local vendors, children activities and great food! Thanks to all of the local businesses that supported us. We raised close to \$6,000.



### SPONSORS

#### ACTIVITY SPONSORS



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# FUNDRAISING EVENTS

## SPONSORS (CONTINUED)

### TABLE SPONSORS



### FENCE SPONSORS



### SUPPORT SPONSORS



■ Door prize ticket included with non-perishable item in support of the UGL Giving Pantry.

## FUNDRAISING EVENTS

### ROCK THE HIGHLANDS, AWOSTING CLUBHOUSE

November 6, 2025

This event brought families together to enjoy music, line dancing, and food which was generously donated by local restaurants. We raised \$4,390.



### SPONSORS

#### TITLE SPONSOR



#### FOOD SPONSORS



#### MUSIC SPONSOR



#### SUPPORT SPONSORS



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## TEACHER GRANTS

### GRANT #1

### COACH PROVOST AGILITY POLES

Coach Provost Agility Poles for Varsity Field Hockey Team for \$399. “Prov’s Props” provide unique drills and a new way of training athletes that has been very helpful. The poles provide a 3D idea of an opponent and ways to move around them. Which allows for a better visual and gets the players moving and being more agile.



### TESTIMONIAL

This season was a great one for WMFH, not just because of our winning records on varsity, JV, and Frosh, but because we had FUN together at practices, games, team events, on and OFF of the field. We were bonded and will always remember our time together. JV was undefeated, 14-0, Frosh were 8-5-5, and Varsity was 19-3 (county champs and 2nd in our conference!). I like keeping my players on their toes at practices, so they never know what is going to come their way! I used our agility poles in many different ways, such as dribbling and weaving drills, cutting drills, marking drills, targets, aerial passing stations, and more. The team's favorite was our FULL FIELD, cutting drill in which I set up the agility cones throughout the field and the players had to sprint up field and cut around the cones to receive a pass and then quickly send the ball up field to the next cone. It was a LOT of running and cutting, but I swear it got us success on the field. We were fierce, aggressive, and we out conditioned our opponents. Thank you to the Highlander Ed Foundation for making this all happen!

– Krista Provost, Field Hockey Coach

## TEACHER GRANTS

### GRANT #2 STUDENT IPADS

Halei (Haley) Basket and Stephanie Janitz of Paradise Knoll's CLIMB program applied for and received \$10,000 for student iPads. The iPads are going to access Augmentative and Alternative Communication Apps, students with limited verbal communication will have a voice. The devices will create a more engaging and personalized learning experience for every child.



### TESTIMONIAL

Having the additional iPads within the classroom has assisted with the way our students learn, communicate, and demonstrate their understanding. The impact on both teaching and learning has been overwhelmingly positive, and we are grateful for the opportunities this technology has created for all of the students.

– Mrs. Halei Basket,  
CLIMB teacher

## TEACHER GRANTS

### GRANT #3

### FLEXIBLE CLASSROOM SEATING

Amy Ruglio at Macopin remodeled her classroom utilizing flexible seating for \$4,000.



### TESTIMONIAL

My students and I are so grateful for the flexible seating options purchased through the Highlander Education Foundation grant. From a teacher's perspective, the most valuable feedback my students give regarding alternate seating choices is how many of them say it has helped them to like reading better. They claim to be less distracted by other students, more comfortable, and happier about being in the classroom. One student explained that, "Rocking in a gaming chair lets me read without getting in trouble." Another student stated, "Flexible seating lets me move, and that helps me focus better." Overall, giving students choice has made them take more responsibility for the learning environment. One boy asserted that "Flexible seating makes the room feel more like 'our room' rather than just Mrs. Ruglio's" At the start of each period, students set themselves up for success by adjusting the room arrangement before the bell rings, and they clean up without reminders at the end.

– Mrs. Amy Ruglio, Macopin Teacher

## DONATIONS TO WMTPS DISTRICT

### DONATION #1 JEN PAWOL TAILGATE PARTY

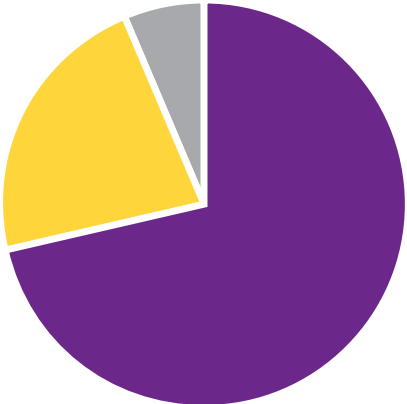
\$500 was donated to the Jen Pawol Tailgate Party to help offset the cost to the sports booster clubs that participated in that event.



# FINANCIAL REVIEW

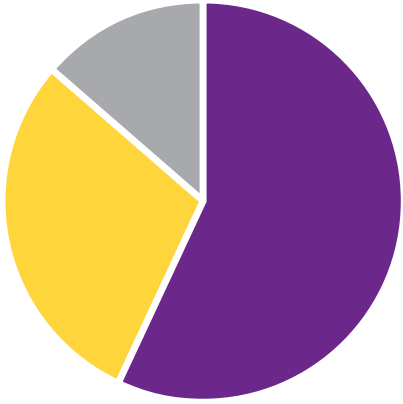
In accordance with our Bylaws, Highlander Education Foundation completed its first annual mandatory audit. We extend our appreciation to the Audit Committee for their diligence in ensuring compliance. We are pleased to report that funds raised have been reinvested into our community through teacher grants, as intended.

## REVENUE



- 71.4% – Fundraising
- 22.4% – Contributions
- 6.2% – Programs

## EXPENSES



- 57% – Community Programs
- 29.5% – Fundraising
- 13.5% – Administrative/Operation

## THANK YOU

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**My deepest gratitude goes to the people who make this work possible. Our progress exists because of those who have guided us, informed us, listened with intention, and stood beside us every step of the way.**

I would like to extend special recognition to Marisa Gough for her steadfast financial oversight. Her commitment to fiduciary responsibility has ensured HEF's continued stability and responsible growth. Thank you to Lisa Johnson for her diligence in managing licensure requirements and governance matters, keeping the organization aligned and compliant. I am also grateful to Christina Duffy for her organization and for always being a trusted sounding board.

Sincere appreciation goes to our dedicated committee members: Lori Atkinson, Mike Gruber, Judy Asaro, Kate Romeo, Ryan Gabriel, Nicole Torp, Lisa Ruffo, Pat Hart, Scott Bruce, Joanna Nacarra, Victoria Hunt, Kaylee Johnson, and Liam Kevin. Your behind-the-scenes efforts, thoughtful contributions, meaningful dialogue, and commitment have been instrumental in the Foundation's development and continued growth.

Thank you to the volunteers who consistently give their time and energy at our events and help make our fundraising efforts successful. We are also grateful to the teachers and staff who have taken the initiative to write grants and patiently awaited the resources needed to enhance their classrooms.

Sincere thanks to Mayor Michele Dale for her unwavering support and steadfast partnership in advocating for West Milford.

I appreciate the Board of Education Trustees for their collaboration and continued support of the Foundation.

Thank you to the administrative team, especially Dr. Kitchin and Mr. Novak, for their time, cooperation, and commitment to building a strong partnership.

We are only as strong as the people behind us. We lead together.

**Cortney Stephenson**  
**Foundation President**

**When I met Cortney, Marisa, and Christina four years ago to launch what would become the Highlander Education Foundation, I had no idea what to expect!** It has turned out to be an incredible and fulfilling journey – thanks to you, our supporters and volunteers. I'm grateful that, in this donor report, we have been able to highlight all we've accomplished through our collective hard work, creativity, resourcefulness, and partnerships. The impact we've had on our students is life-changing, and I'm motivated as we move into this new year with the knowledge that this is only the beginning of the ways the Highlander Education Foundation will enrich the educational opportunities available here in West Milford. Thank you!

**Lisa Johnson**  
**Foundation Vice President**

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## THANK YOU

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**It all started with an idea – and with people who believed in it.**

There are so many individuals to thank, beginning with those who first inspired this vision: creating an Education Foundation from the ground up to support and raise funds for our schools. Your belief made everything else possible.

To our volunteers – thank you. You gave what little free time you had, showing up and lending a hand whenever it was needed most. Your generosity and commitment did not go unnoticed.

Thank you to the local businesses who supported our events and invested in our mission, and to our legal team, who provided invaluable guidance when we needed it most. We are deeply grateful to the schools, staff, and administration for supporting us in more ways than one.

Most of all, thank you to the Core Four. Through countless phone calls, early Saturday meetings, and personal sacrifices, you poured your time and energy into making HEF what it is today. You are the reason this foundation exists.

**Marisa Gough**  
Foundation Treasurer

**Thank you doesn't feel like a sufficient sentiment to capture my appreciation for your support of the Highlander Education Foundation.**

Whether you donated your time, your hard earned money or your thoughts and encouragement, I appreciate you.

**Christina G. Duffy**  
Foundation Secretary

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A special thanks for the time and talent of [Symmetre Design Group](#) for donating the design of this publication.

## CLOSING REMARKS

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Multiple budget reports and presentations show that state aid has dropped by about \$9 million since the 2017–18 school year, largely due to changes in New Jersey’s school funding formulas. While we haven’t been able to fully close that gap, we’re proud to have distributed nearly \$13,000 in teacher grants to WMTPS staff in just one year. With the continued support of our trustees, members, volunteers, and local business sponsors, we hope to close that gap even further.

We’ll keep working alongside the community to raise awareness of our town’s unique challenges and to help amplify our voices with local legislators. Our goal is simple: to provide as much enrichment for our schools as possible. As we always say, when the community is doing well, our schools are doing well too.

