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# A Citizen and a Small Foundation Awaken a Community's Ties

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In America, we recognize that individuals working toward common purpose can accomplish great things. We celebrate well-functioning teams, especially in the realms of sports and business enterprise.

In our communities, our states, and the nation as a whole, however, we are divided. We separate ourselves by class and race, and pledge ourselves to political ideologies, parties, and faiths. According to studies of our social and economic landscape, we are becoming two nations—families that live comfortably, and families that face daily hardship and an uncertain future.

Etched into our currency is the inscription, "Out of the many, one." But we are finding it more and more difficult to fulfill the promise we made to ourselves.

In this era, communities where residents pull together to benefit everyone—not just one group or class—seem extraordinary. These places remind us of the enormous scope of what can be accomplished when residents associate with each other regularly, build trust, and develop a shared understanding that the health, welfare, and opportunity of each individual is wrapped up in the well-being of all.

In Vermont, there is a county where residents give nearly 4.5 percent of their incomes to charity, a higher rate than that of all other counties in New England. Dawn Archbold, executive director of the United Way of Lamoille County, [told the \*Chronicle of Philanthropy\*](#) that people in her community take pride in their 10 small towns, and, because they know their neighbors, they give. "It almost seems like we have the same mind-set," she said. "I'm in awe of it all the time."

On Monhegan Island off the coast of Maine, residents joined together to find ways to make the island's energy supply cheaper and more reliable. Facing the highest power rates in the nation—almost six times the national average, and an old, underdeveloped electric grid, residents sent a contingent to a small Danish island called Samsø, about four hours from Copenhagen, to study that island's achievements in renewable energy. Through a combination of wind, solar, geothermal, and plant-based energy, Samsø reached green energy independence in 2005. Monhegan and other Maine islands hope to implement some of Samsø's energy innovations with the help of students from the the College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor.

## Even where the ties that bind are strong, it takes one or two passionate, driven people with a big vision to awaken those ties and catalyze collective effort.

On the Danish Island of Samsø, a husband and wife team, Soren Hermansen and Malene Lunden, were essential in motivating islanders to develop green energy. According to the *New York Times*, Mr. Hermansen's talent for understanding the unique interests of different groups of residents such as farmers and plumbers, and being able to explain the project in ways that resonate with each group, was powerful in getting everyone on board.

Community efforts on Ocracoke Island, North Carolina offer some of the clearest insights I have found into how passionate citizens can catalyze projects for the public good. Like Monhegan Island, Ocracoke faced a crisis a few years ago. Its centuries-old fishing industry was in danger of collapsing, with the closing of the island's last remaining fish house. A fish house may not sound like a crucial community asset, but it is the keystone to a whole economy and way of life. Without a place to take their catch to market, the island's 30 watermen could not profitably maintain their businesses; 30 families would lose their livelihood; the island would lose a part of its economy and heritage that infuses its culture; and no longer would working watermen educate thousands of visitors and teachers about ecology and history. (Ocracoke is home to a campus of the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching.)

Not long after the fish house closed, a group of watermen came to talk with a resident named Robin Payne. Robin was known as a community resource. She had moved to Ocracoke a few years before, an unlikely islander who had degrees in interior design and historic preservation, got seasick easily, and fell deeply in love with Ocracoke. Robin began educating herself about the environment, the fishing industry, and the island's history and culture.

Her passion, curiosity, and ability to engage people and listen are qualities that gave Robin tremendous credibility. They are also qualities, we have found in our research on leadership, that can put individuals on a path to catalyzing change.

Robin had been working with a few residents to launch the first public foundation in Ocracoke, to address social, economic, and educational needs and incubate sustainable initiatives. To help the watermen, she set about studying organizational and legal structures for saving the fish house, community participation models, and potential partners on the mainland who share goals of preservation and economic development.

Robin and colleagues developed several models and presented them to the watermen and the community. After discussion and debate, residents developed the following plan: The watermen would create a collective called the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association to anchor and support their industry and enhance the community through education and restoration; the Ocracoke Foundation would house the association, providing fiscal sponsorship and technical assistance; and the Ocracoke Foundation would purchase the fish house as a for-profit subsidiary under its nonprofit umbrella. The watermen's association would elect managers to operate the fish house, and profits would be re-invested in the business.

As expressed in the [Memorandum of Understanding](#), the foundation's goal was to, "ensure that the fish house never falls into private hands; to make sure the mission and goals of the project stay in focus."

**In this bold move, the community recognized the public value of a private asset, and preserved it as a public asset, securing its fishing industry, economy, culture, and living heritage.**

To finance the purchase and needed upgrades, Robin and colleagues worked with Ocracoke residents on fundraising initiatives, and also identified funding partners on the mainland—including the [North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center](#) and the [Golden LEAF Foundation](#). The total cost was over \$700,000.

Robin Payne's work and leadership gives me great hope and inspiration. She shows us how a citizen with passion, curiosity, insight, vision, courage, and humility can help fellow community members recognize their bonds and shared interests, their skills and talents, and their collective power. As big as the tangible successes are, nurturing the community's capacity for collective action may be Robin's and the foundation's most transformative and lasting achievement. The Ocracoke Foundation went on to incubate other community projects.

"The foundation awakened the community to its ties. We showed people how they could come together to look at the big picture," reflects Robin.

In a way that echoes the path of other authentic leaders, passion and curiosity took Robin on a journey she did not anticipate going on. An island visitor notes, "Robin, who describes herself as being so shy as to almost be antisocial, found herself with the strength to converse with all manner of groups—media, locals, teachers, fishermen, legislature—on and on it went."

Writing in the [Ocracoke Observer](#), resident Jamie Tunnell reflects, "Often, people can't see past what's in it for them to look towards the greater good, but she (Robin Payne) has unselfishly devoted more than anyone knows to see this happen."

*Senior Program Director Andy Carroll writes resources, designs workshops, and facilitates seminars for funders. Andy also dedicates a significant portion of his time to managing our Leadership Initiative that defines, validates, nurtures, and celebrates the many ways philanthropists lead. Andy has 25 years of experience in nonprofit organizations, and he enjoys talking with funders about their questions, interests, passions, and plans for making a difference. Follow Andy on Twitter [@andycarrollexpo](#).*

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