

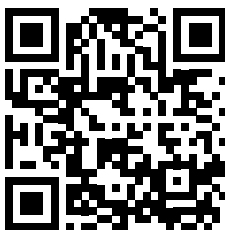


Live In Franklin

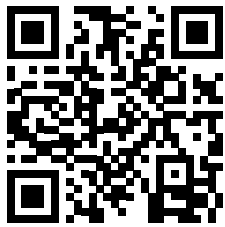
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Grand Opening – The management team at the newest Jersey Mike's sub shop on Veronica Avenue talk about their location's offerings.



Council Reorg. – Members of the Township Council talk about the upcoming year, and what they want to accomplish while in office.



School Board Reorg. – The Board of Education welcomed two new members and one returning incumbent at its annual reorganization meeting.



Noor Night – We spoke with the organizers of Noor Night, who talked about preparations for the first-ever celebration of Muslim Heritage Month.



Franklin Reporter & Advocate 2024 Man Of The Year: Food Bank's Derek Smith



MAN OF THE YEAR – Derek Smith, Executive Director of the Franklin Food Bank, is the 2024 Franklin Reporter & Advocate Man of the Year.

Public servant" is usually a moniker reserved for elected officials.

But a person doesn't necessarily have to win an election to serve the public, as exemplified by the Franklin Food Bank's Executive Director, Derek Smith, who the Franklin Reporter & Advocate

is proud to name as its 2023 Man of the Year.

Smith was named Executive Director in 2022, succeeding longtime Executive Director Frank Hasner.

No newcomer to the Food Bank, Smith was a three-year volunteer before being chosen to lead the or-

ganization.

Before coming to the Food Bank, Smith had already established a solid foundation in leading organizations chartered to help others, mainly in education.

After receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree from Dartmouth College, Smith began

his career as a program director for Kaplan, an educational services company.

He also served as program director at The Princeton Review; was a network leader for New Visions for Public Schools, where he managed leadership, instruction, and operations support for 26 New York City public schools, and was a managing director at KIPP NYC, a national charter school network.

Smith also founded Bridgetown Leadership Coaching, a leadership coaching and mentoring organization focused on the development of new and emerging leaders of color.

He was named the Food Bank's Executive Director at a time when the country was emerging from the two-year-long Covid-19 pandemic, which also saw a dramatic increase in the number of families turning to the Food Bank for help.

Continued on Page 7.

National Guard Armory Included On State List Of Migrant Processing Sites

It's not needed now, but the U.S. Army National Guard Armory on Hamilton Street remains on the list of sites to process migrants arriving in New Jersey, a military official said on January 24.

The Armory "was previ-

ously identified as a potential state site should the need arise to process migrants," Lt. Col. Agneta Murnan, a spokesperson for the state Department of Military and Veteran Affairs, said in an email.

"Based on our information from the NJ Office of

Emergency Management, we don't anticipate the need to use this facility at this time given the low number of migrants who have settled in New Jersey over the past few weeks," Murnan said.

Murnan did confirm, though, that the Armory re-

mains on the list of processing sites should it be needed.

The issue arose following the mass busing of immigrants crossing into the United States from Texas and other southern states.

Things came to a head several weeks ago when it was discovered that hundreds of migrants had arrived at various transit points in the state after being bussed from Texas and other border states.

Many of the migrants then took trains to New York City, which was their original final destination. The buses allegedly stopped in New Jersey to circumvent new rules promulgated by New York City Mayor Eric Adams to more closely monitor the number of buses carrying the migrants into the city.

The Armory is the headquarters of the National Guard's 42nd Regional Support Group which provides "mission command to assigned or attached units performing sustainment and security missions in support

Continued on Page 6.

Five New Police Officers – Four Franklin Natives – Sworn In



MAKING HISTORY – FPD officer Patrick Kanu is ceremoniously sworn in at the January 23 Township Council meeting. Officials said Kanu is the first West African uniformed officer in the township.

Five new Franklin Township Police officers – two of whom are graduates of the Youth Police

Academy – were ceremoniously sworn in at the January 23 Township Council meeting.

Additionally, four of the five are township natives, said Township Public Safety Director Quovella Maeweather.

Those ceremoniously sworn in, and their hometowns, were:

- Vito Ross of Newark, formerly worked at Franklin High School
- Ashley Ramos of Franklin and a four-year participant in the Youth Academy
- Zairy Salas of Franklin, a four-year participant in the Youth Academy. Salas transferred from the Rutgers University Police Department
- Ishmael Saleem of

Continued on Page 6.

FRANKLIN REPORTER & ADVOCATE

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Mayor, Council Sworn In At Reorganization

SWEARING-IN – Mayor Phil Kramer, accompanied by his wife, Laurie Conrad Kramer, takes the Oath of Office at the Township Council reorganization meeting.

Councilmember Ed Potosnak was voted in as Deputy Mayor at the January 2 Township Council reorganization meeting.

Also at the meeting, re-elected At-Large Councilmembers Kimberly Francois and Ram Anbarasan and newcomer Alex Kharazi and Mayor Phil Kramer were sworn in.

The Council also made appointments to a variety of township positions, as well as some boards and committees.

Kramer, who is starting his third term as Mayor, said the Council faces “many

challenges ahead, such as the enormous jump in health care costs that’s going to affect out budget, and the issues of development, both commercial and residential.”

“We have some exciting projects coming up, though,” he added. “Partnering with the BOE on health care and on pre-school, partnering with (Raritan Valley Community College) on job training and partnering with the YMCA on all they can offer.”

Francois, who is marking her 20th year in township government, said, “it is an honor and a privilege to serve you people of Franklin Twp

for four more years.”

“I want to thank you for believing in me ... for allowing me to serve you for another four years,” she said. “I’m looking forward to continuing the work that I started with the youth center ... my commitments to the people of Franklin Township are to the businesses, the youth and the families of the township.”

Councilman Ran Anbarasan said that he was “honored to be reelected as your councilman at large. I promise to work hard every day to make sure that I live up to your expectations.”

Some of Anbarasan’s

goals, he said, are “providing learning opportunities for our youth, making our community safer, protecting our environment. I’m committed to finding solutions for everyone.”

“But I need your help and your input,” he said.

Councilman Alex Kharazi is the newest member of the Council.

Kharazi said that even though he has been involved in community service for years, on the Council, “I humbly see myself as a new student.”

“I am blessed to be surrounded by a great team of wise men and woman with years of experience in serving the community,” he said. “I look forward to collaborating and working with them.”

“My dream is to see more equity among the residents of the town,” he said. “We must create more employment opportunities, address food and rent insecurities, support small businesses, improve access to better education and health services, make our township safer and promote a stronger partnership between local and county government.”

“I believe one of Franklin’s greatest attributes is its diversity,” he said.

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Singh, Shaban Chosen As New Leaders Of Board Of Education



NEW BOARD PRESIDENT – Ardaman Singh reacts after she was voted in as school board president at the Board’s January 4 reorganization meeting.

Board of Education members Ardaman Singh and Sami Shaban were chosen by their colleagues as Board president and vice-president, respectively, at the January 4 reorganization meeting.

Also at the meeting, Board newcomers Erica Inocencio and Jimmie Parker III, and returning Board member Bill Grippo, were sworn in to the seats they won in the November 2023 general election.

Singh replaces Nancy LaCorte, who served as Board president since 2018, with Singh as vice-president.

Singh has been a member of the Board since 2017 while Shaban was elected in 2021.

Singh was among the Board members who had many words of praise for LaCorte.

“It’s going to be very hard for me to fill Nancy’s shoes,” Singh said. “She’s a Warrior for life and she’s been a great friend.”

“Thank you is not enough for the years of service, for giving everything to this district and mentoring us into this role,” she said. “You’re a true leader, you’re a true mentor.”

Turning to Shaban, Singh said, “I think, Sami, you and I will be great partners. We will keep the cohesion on the team and work together. We’ve come a long way, and we don’t want to see anything moving backwards.”

“2024 will bring greater accomplishments and better things,” she said.

Shaban thanked the Board members for voting him in as vice-president.

“I hope that my time on the Board has shown that this is something very, very important to me,” he said.

“I will see it through for the children of this district.”

LaCorte, Shaban said, “epitomized what it is to put her heart first and lead by example. I can’t say enough good words about the good that Nancy has done.”

Turning to Singh, Shaban said, “I feel so good that you are our leader. I think our pathway is onward and upward and I think you’re the leader to do it.”

After he was sworn in to his second term, Grippo noted that he will have completed 50 years of public service when his current term ends.

“I hope to see in the next three years a Board that works together,” Grippo said. Three goals he has set for himself include “the early childhood development center, assisting the food bank in expanding their workspace, and the institution of a YMCA in Franklin Township.”

“I want to thank Nancy (LaCorte) for her leadership and integrity and the wonderful job she’s done over the years as Board president,” Grippo said.

Shaban, he said, “brings a fresh point of view to the Board of Ed and a bright future.”

Parker said he looks forward to “doing the work of helping the community continue on its path of improvement, of taking care of the children, making them first and also of bringing the community even closer together.”

Inocencio said that she is “looking forward to serve.”

She said she was still “overwhelmed by the faith and trust” voters placed in her, “and I promise to do my best.”



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Muslim Heritage Celebrated At Community Center

35th Tour De Franklin Set For April 28



WHIRLING DERVISH – A Sufi whirling dancer performs during the inaugural Muslim Heritage Month celebration at the Senior/Community Center.

The inaugural Muslim Heritage Month celebration in the township – called Noor Night – attracted hundreds of people to the Senior/Community Center in the Municipal Complex on January 14.

Gov. Phil Murphy signed the legislation designating January as Muslim Heritage Month in January 2023.

The afternoon featured exhibitions of Islamic arts and crafts, singing, dancing, and, of course, food.

The event’s keynote speaker, U.S. Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-12), told the crowd that “we’re here among friends with high expectations for one another. And this observance holds a very unique significance as it allows us to reflect on the very recent and ongoing devastation taking place in the Middle East.”

“We observe Muslim Heritage Month here in New Jersey during a heartbreaking humanitarian crisis that is thousands of miles away that even touches us in our communities and in our neighborhoods and among our friends,” she said. “God bless you.”

“The Muslim-American legacy is one of unconditional support for one’s neighbor,” she said. “To show love and respect, dignity and respect, and care and compassion

on behalf of anyone in their community who has a greater need than they do.”

“That expression of sharing and hoping for the best for one another is what will make us strong in this country and in this district and in this town,” Watson Coleman said.

“I hope that this inaugural observation of Muslim Heritage Month gives us all that oomph to take us through 2024 with the vigor, the urgency, the sense of love, mutuality, collectivity and responsibility that this democracy so deserves and so do our children,” she said.

Mayor Phil Kramer said that he was “so proud to support and be a part of this

memorable event celebrating the beautiful Muslim culture from around the world, but specifically here in Franklin.”

“It certainly is a matter of pride for me to look out and see the wonderfully diverse Franklin community, not only represented but supporting each other here this evening,” Kramer said.

“Franklin Township remains a testimony to the possibilities that exist for peace and harmony, that we recognize and understand what makes each of us unique,” he said. “Noor Night is just such an opportunity.”

Viq Pervaaz, one of the event’s organizers, said he had some wishes for those attending.

“If we’ve done our job correctly ... then we hope you’ll leave in the trifecta of head, heart and hand,” he said.

“We hope you leave enlightened with a little more knowledge of Muslim heritage and Muslim culture,” he said.

“We hope your hands leave fulfilled by sampling some of the delicious food that was donated by our sponsors, and we hope your hands also leave fulfilled meeting a friendly stranger, in addition to those you know in our community,” he said.

“Most importantly, we hope that your hearts leave fulfilled and happy with the intent of a 2024 filled with peace, hope and prosperity,” Pervaaz said.

Among those also in attendance were State Assemblyman Joe Daniels (D-17); Somerset County officials, including Somerset County Commission Director Shanel Robinson and Commissioner Sara Sooy; Somerset County Sheriff Darren Russo; Somerset County Surrogate Bernice Jalloh, Township Council members Shepa Uddin, Alex Kharazi, and Ed Potosnak, and township Parks and Recreation Director Beau Byrtus.

The 35th Annual Tour de Franklin Charity Bike Ride benefiting the Franklin Food Bank is set for April 28 at the Franklin High School.

The Tour de Franklin is the Franklin Food Bank’s largest annual fundraising event and a Spring tradition in Franklin Township, when up to 800 cyclists ride through the community to fight local hunger. Additionally, 2024 marks a major milestone for the Tour as it celebrates its 35 consecutive years since 1989.

The Tour de Franklin consists of seven events including 62-, 40-, 25-, 10-, and 5-mile rides through Franklin Township, as well as a 10-mile ride and 1-5-mile walk-or-ride along the scenic D&R Canal, offering something for everyone. The rides are staggered throughout the morning with breakfast, lunch, and snacks provided.

A small group of cyclists started the first Tour de Franklin in 1989 to support the Franklin Food Bank, raising \$1,500. The Tour grew to become part of Somerset County’s community fiber and an anticipated annual ride among avid cyclists while raising much-needed funds.

“We are thrilled to reach this 35-year milestone,” Tour de Franklin Chairperson Lisa Frey said in a press release. “While the Tour de Franklin has seen changes over the past 35 years, it has always been a fun day for everyone and a great way for cyclists and the community to support the Franklin Food Bank. We look forward to a wonderful 35th celebration on April 28.”

All proceeds raised by the Tour de Franklin directly support the Franklin Food Bank operations and the funding is a critical part of the annual budget. In 2023, the Franklin Food Bank distributed an estimated 2.8 million pounds of food and accommodated approximately 30,000 visits to the Client Choice Market and Drive-Through events. Last year the Tour raised over \$120,000, directly supporting these efforts to fight hunger in the Franklin Township community.

To learn more or register for the Tour de Franklin, visit franklinfoodbank.org/tourdefranklin/ and follow @TheFranklinFoodBank on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok.

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MLK Community Foundation Continues Scholarship Fundraising With Annual Breakfast



Dr. Francine Conway

Transformation through psychological health was the keynote theme of the 26th Dr. Martin Luther King Community Foundation’s annual community breakfast at the DoubleTree Hotel on January 15.

That theme, tied to the teachings of Dr. King, was delivered by the event’s keynote speaker, Dr. Francine Conway, Chancellor of Rutgers University – New Brunswick.

“For those of us who have directly experienced trauma,

whether it’s racial, ethnic, religious, gender and otherwise, Dr. King calls on us to be transformed by the renewal of our minds, which means taking care of your psychological health,” she said.

“Do not be a victim and conform to the path that history has created. Instead, be transformed by the renewing of your mind,” she said.

Several hundred people gathered in the Double Tree’s ballroom for the event, which featured performances by township students.

The breakfast is the Foundation’s main fundraiser. Money raised is used to award scholarships to graduating Franklin Township seniors.

Over the past 26 years, the Foundation has awarded \$268,400 to 230 students, said Rabbi Eli Garfinkel, a member of the Foundation’s Board of Trustees.

Conway also spoke about the importance in avoiding conformity.

“When we’re faced with our pain, when atrocities of the news awaken the echoes of trauma, when we face the impact of disconnection ... it is then that we must dig deep

and hold on to our humanity and refuse to conform,” she said.

“Recent social events forced us to wrestle with the dialectical, in other words, to act through opposing forces, and in these situations, we must remember to uphold our values, especially in seemingly contradictory positions,” Conway said.

“We do this knowing that all of us are tied together by our collective histories,” she said. “Dr. King’s sermon is still relevant today, and it gives us the solution ... be not conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

“Whether we leave King-sized legacies or small ones, we can decide what will bear our signature,” Conway said.

The event was MC’d by Franklin Township Police Capt. Sean Hebbon, the Foundation’s president, and was kicked off by the FTPD’s Honor Guard’s presentation of the colors.

Franklin High School student Gabriella Stewart sang the National Anthem, and Joseph Amponsah, of the New Jersey Orators’ Somerset chapter, recited poems by

Maya Angelou.

Central Jersey College Prep Charter School student Joharri Saunders sang, “Everything I Wanted.” There were also performances by the Community Fellowship Mass Choir.

There were dance performances by the Franklin Middle School 7th Grade Dancers and 8th Grade Dancers, and the CJCP Dancers.

Fr. Lancelot McGrath of St. Matthias Church gave the Invocation, and Preeta Acharya of the Baha’i Community gave the Benediction.

Musical interludes were provided by the Franklin Township Community Band.

More information on donating or applying for the scholarships can be found at the Foundation’s web site at www.ftmlk.org.

Proposed Jain Archway Still Not Approved

Representatives of a township temple were once again unsuccessful January 3 in getting Planning Board approvals for a decorative archway planned for the temple’s driveway on Cedar Grove Lane.

The difficulty arose when some Planning Board members asserted that years’-old approvals for the Jain Center included a stipulation that they must align their driveway with one of the Cedar Grove Center’s driveways across the street.

Temple representatives and their attorney insisted that while there was discussion about aligning the driveway, there was no Board dictate that it be done.

The application was heard in June, July and September 2023. The driveway issue was raised in September, and Jain officials decided

to suspend their application until it could be looked into.

The planned archway would be 28 feet high and 56 feet wide, and positioned about 50 feet from the curb along Cedar Grove Lane.

The archway would display six signs, one at the top and one on each base, on both sides of the structure.

As he did in September, Board Member Robert Thomas led the charge into getting the driveway aligned.

Thomas told Jain attorney John DeLuca that his law firm colleague, Peter Lanfrit, agreed to moving the driveway during a hearing years ago on an unrelated application.

“Mr. Lanfrit only appeared at that first hearing (in June) where this application was carried because there was no quorum,” DeLuca said.

RVCC Earns National Recognition

The Pray Family Center for Service Learning and Community Engagement at Raritan Valley Community College has earned national recognition from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

RVCC is one of 40 U.S.

colleges and universities to receive the 2024 Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, an elective designation that indicates institutional commitment to community engagement. The announcement was made by the American Council on Education (ACE) and the

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

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Five New Police Officers Sworn In At Township Council Meeting

Continued from Page 1.

Plainfield who transferred from the Plainfield Police Department

- Patrick Kanu of Franklin. Officials said Kanu is the department's first West African uniformed officer.

Speaking about the fact that two of the new officers attended the Youth Academy, Maeweather said, "That is a

message to the young people of our town that it is possible to live and serve in the township and be a proud member of this police department."

Maeweather said that with the five additions, the department more closely represents "the diversity that is in our community. I appreciate each and every one of the citizens of Franklin for trust-

ing myself and the command staff to make sure that we are doing that."

"We are the leaders in the state of New Jersey in mirroring our community and making sure that we have officers from almost every country represented," Maeweather said.

She said that she does not have to recruit diverse offi-

cers.

"I do not go out looking for these officers, they come here because this community represents what they are looking for," she said.

Mayor Phil Kramer thanked the new and current FTPD officers for their work.

"To the five who were just sworn in, and everyone who wears a badge ... Council stands behind you, both literally and figuratively, because you stand for us and you help keep us safe," he said.

"Thank you for all you do, thank you for what you are about to do, all five of you," Kramer said.

Kramer said that Kanu being the first West African to join the police force was

"very gratifying."

"The West African community has been very good to me, and I'm glad that they're being represented," he said.

Township Councilman James Vassanella (D-Ward 5) said he felt "blessed and proud" because of how many of the new officers are Franklin natives.

"That's a fantastic thing because when you're here, putting your life on the line protecting people, to understand the landscape and the people and everything about it I think makes it more of a connection," he said.

Councilman Charles Onyejiaka (D-Ward 3), also a West African native, congratulated Kanu on his accom-

plishment.

Onyejiaka said the late Foday Mansaray, a leader in the West African community until his death from Covid-19, mentored young Kanu.

"Now he has turned out to be someone we are all proud of," Onyejiaka said. "No doubt Foday would be very proud of him."

Township Councilwoman Kimberly Francois said that she was "very pleased that the diversity of the township is being represented by the police officers within the department."

She said the fact that two of them went through the Youth Academy "made my heart very warm."

National Guard Armory Is On State List For Migrant Processing

Continued from Page 1.

local civil authorities for the purpose of protection of life, property and the preservation of peace, order, and

public safety," according to its web site.

Mayor Phil Kramer said in a Letter to the Editor earlier this month that he, State Sen. Bob Smith and state

Assemblymen Joe Daniels and Kevin Egan have asked Gov. Phil Murphy for more information about the plan to use the Armory.



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FR&A Man Of The Year: Derek Smith Of Franklin Food Bank



FUNDRAISER-IN-CHIEF – Franklin Food Bank Executive Director Derek Smith is standing at the far left in this photo from an event late in 2023.

Continued from Page 1.

Smith said this past November that the Food Bank was on track to serve between 17,000 and 18,000 families in 2023, a more than 50 percent increase over 2022.

He attributed part of that acceptance of going to a food pantry to the Food Bank's efforts to reduce the stigma associated with getting help from pantries.

"You take a Trader Joe's, you take your friendly neighborhood bodega, and you have Bodega Joe's," has become his mantra when describing the Food Bank.

Smith has made an impression in the community during his short tenure at the helm of the Food Bank.

Franklin Police Department Det. Sgt. ReBecca Lea, head of the department's Community Relations Bureau, said that Smith has become "an integral part of Franklin Township Police Department's monthly food distribution held in the Community Relations Bu-

reau parking lot. Over 800 boxes of fresh produce are freely given to residents by the officers and community volunteers."

"When the Franklin Food Bank hired Derek Smith, they hired a gem," she said. "Derek is a family man that not only cares about his staff but also the clients the Food Bank serve."

"His unwavering commitment to his family, his job, his Franklin community is truly remarkable and leaves no surprise that he is selected as Person of the Year," she said.

Vimal Sodhani, president of the Sodhani Foundation, has been a Food Bank supporter for many years.

Smith's "unwavering dedication and tireless efforts in assisting Franklin Township families in need have made a significant impact on our community."

"Derek's leadership at the Franklin Food Bank has not only provided essential resources to those facing difficult times but has also

inspired positive change," he said. "Under his guidance, the Franklin Food Bank has become a beacon of hope for many, offering support and assistance to families struggling with food insecurity."

"Derek's commitment to making a difference goes beyond his role as the executive director," Sodhani said. "He has consistently demonstrated a deep passion for helping others and has played a crucial role in fostering a sense of community within Franklin Township."

Smith's "impact on the lives of Franklin Township residents is immeasurable, and recognizing his efforts would not only honor him but also serve as a source of inspiration for others in our community," he said.

Bill Grippo, the FR&A's Man of the Year for 2022, is in charge of community outreach for the Food Bank.

Grippo called Smith "a man for all seasons."

"He is there for the clients of the Food Bank all

year, each day," he said. "His commitment to food security is unwavering, his energy is magnetic, and his charisma overflows with a generous spirit."

Nick DiMeglio, president of the Franklin Township Chamber of Commerce, praised Smith for his work in "revamp(ing) the organization."

"He has made it community friendly and opening to residents," DiMeglio said. "He has come up with innovative ways to fundraise and collaborate with township and county organizations to increase the presence and donations to the organization."

Smith is "supportive of other organizations in town such as the Youth Center, Chamber of Commerce and the schools to make sure that everyone that needs it has access to food," DiMeglio said.

One of the people who

has worked closely with Smith since his appointment as Executive Director is Allison O'Brien, the Food Bank's Development Director.

"Derek's inspirational leadership has lifted the Franklin Food Bank to a new level of excellence," she said. "While the pandemic is responsible in part for forcing the Food Bank to expand, it has really been under Derek's direction that the organization has truly experienced growth."

"Under his direction, the Food Bank has expanded programming, implemented hybrid distribution models and launched wraparound services to address root causes of food insecurity," she said. "Derek also sits on various committees at the local, regional and state level to ensure the Franklin Food Bank is performing the advocacy necessary to affect change."

O'Brien said Smith's 25-year career in educational reform in underserved communities is "key experience for such a large organization in a place like Franklin Township – an incredibly special place with vast diversity across many metrics. His specific respect and admiration for education and schools helps the Food Bank stay connected to our wonderful schools and an at risk population – families with children experience food insecurity at a much higher rate."

"Ultimately my experience of working with Derek has been of a passionate, contemplative and joyful thought partner truly dedicated to lifting every voice whether it's a person shopping in our market, a staff member during a meeting or a volunteer with an idea," she said.

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