Media kit

About Orton Family Foundation

The Orton Family Foundation’s mission is to empower people to shape the future of their communities by improving local decision-making, creating a shared sense of belonging, and ultimately strengthening the social, cultural and economic vibrancy of each place. The foundation is focused on building stronger, healthier and more economically vibrant small cities and towns across America.

Founded in Vermont in 1995, the foundation devoted more than a decade to working with small towns to create Community Heart & Soul ® a model that helps build trust and empowers residents to shape the future of their communities. Community Heart & Soul projects are underway across the country creating positive change that is resident-driven and recognizes the value in the unique character of each place and the deep emotional connection of the people who live there.

About Community Heart & Soul

Community Heart & Soulis a catalyst for positive change in small cities and towns. By actively seeking the collective wisdom of all residents, including those whose voices are often missing, Community Heart & Soul brings people together to build stronger, healthier and more economically vibrant communities. This resident-driven model helps build trust while taking into account the unique character of a town and the deep emotional connection of the people who live there—a town’s “Heart & Soul®.” These collective insights into what truly matters most guide a community in making the best decisions about its future.

Community Heart & Soul is designed for towns with populations less than 50,000. Three principles guide the model: Involve Everyone, Focus on What Matters and Play the Long Game. There are four phases to the model: Lay the Groundwork, Explore Your Community, Make Decisions and Take Action. A key aspect of the model is Community Network Analysis, which is a way for residents to see who is in their community and how to reach them. Story gathering also anchors the model. By hearing residents’ memories, hopes and aspirations, Community Heart & Soul connects people, builds trust and creates a basis for determining what common themes matter most to everyone. These themes become Heart & Soul Statements that guide a town in decision-making and planning.

Towns have seen many benefits emerge from Community Heart & Soul projects. Community Heart & Soul has helped towns strengthen economies, increase community involvement, build leadership, bridge divides, and get groups to work together. With greater involvement and groups working better together, local government can see more clearly how to use resources effectively and sharpen budgets. Most towns take two years to complete a Community Heart & Soul project.

Orton Family Foundation History

Founded in 1995 with headquarters in Shelburne, Vermont, The Orton Family Foundation grew from founder Lyman Orton’s experience as a resident and business owner in a Vermont small town. His parents started the first restored general store in the country, The Vermont Country Store, in 1947 in Weston, Vermont (pop. 566). When Lyman took over the business, he expanded it into a major mail order and online retailer. Lyman was a member of the Weston Planning Commission. The course of events surrounding a controversial development proposal fueled Lyman’s passion for vibrant small towns and planted the seed that eventually grew into Community Heart & Soul.

The development proposal up for review in Weston was for Wildlife Wonderland, an African animal theme park on a hillside in the town. Initially rejected, the park was reconceived with domestic farm animals and was granted a permit. In a matter of months the business closed, but the contentious debate left a lasting impression on Lyman.

“The scars on the side of the mountain healed faster than the scars in the community ever did,” Lyman recalls.

To Lyman, the theme park controversy shed light on a larger problem. Residents weren’t getting involved in planning for their community’s future until something controversial came along. He thought there had to be a better way to approach planning—got all residents involved in planning for the future and recognized the unique characteristics of a place.

With profits from The Vermont Country Store, Lyman founded the Orton Family Foundation. The foundation’s initial work focused on creating tools to help residents make informed development decisions. One of those tools was CommunityViz®, a GIS-based tool to help with visioning that was widely successful and spun off to become its own entity. The foundation next focused on creating a comprehensive community development model to do what Lyman envisioned—bring people together to build stronger, healthier and more economically vibrant communities. A dozen years of research, refinement and testing with towns yielded Community Heart & Soul. Today, towns across the country are using the model to write comprehensive and master plans, downtown plans, revise land-use codes and to make decisions based on the collective wisdom of the people who live in the town—or, as we say at Orton Family Foundation, guided by what matters most.

Fact Sheet

FOUNDED: 1995

LOCATION: Headquarters in Shelburne, Vermont, with offices in Arvada, Colorado

TYPE: Nonprofit

FOUNDERS: Lyman Orton and Noel Fritzinger (1929-2011)

CHAIRMAN BOARD OF TRUSTEES: Lyman Orton

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: David Leckey

MISSION: The Orton Family Foundation seeks to empower people to shape the future of their communities by improving local decision-making, creating a shared sense of belonging and ultimately strengthening the social, cultural and economic vibrancy of each place.

DELIVERY ON MISSION: The foundation created tools to help residents make informed development decisions and then devoted more than a decade to working with small towns directly to create Community Heart & Soul®, a model that empowers residents to shape the future of their communities. Community Heart & Soul is a catalyst for positive change in small cities and towns. By actively seeking the collective wisdom of all residents, including those whose voices are often missing, Community Heart & Soul brings people together to build stronger, healthier and more economically vibrant communities. This resident-driven model helps build trust while taking into account the unique character of a town and the deep emotional connection of the people who live there—a town’s “Heart & Soul®.” These collective insights into what truly matters most guide a community in making the best decisions about its future.

ABOUT COMMUNITY HEART & SOUL: Community Heart & Soul is a model for community development for small cities and towns with populations less than 50,000. Community Heart & Soul is based on three guiding principles: Involve Everyone, Focus on What Matters, and Play the Long Game. There are four phases to the model: Lay the Groundwork, Explore Your Community, Make Decisions and Take Action. Most towns take two years to complete a Community Heart & Soul project.

CONTACT: [Communications@orton.org](mailto:Communications@orton.org); 802-495-0864

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