

In November 2015, the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis worked with 18 other local funders to launch a pair of websites that help donors better understand the needs of those in our community and how to support the nonprofit organizations meeting those needs. These two websites -WHEREweLIVEmidsouth.org and WHEREtoGIVEmidsouth.org – offer in-depth information about our nonprofit community. We asked Sutton Hayes, Vice President of the Community Foundation of Greater Memphis, to tell us more about the initiative.

SCI: Tell us more about how this initiative started?

Hayes: About ten years ago, GuideStar, one of the national sources for nonprofit financial information, launched a product called DonorEdge that would allow community foundations to create custom nonprofit databases for their local communities. The Community Foundation of Greater Memphis had been interested in using this technology for a while, knowing that one of the more common refrains in the nonprofit and grantmaking industries in Memphis has always been: Isn't there just one place where I can go to learn more about the nonprofits in this area? The technology was evolving, however, and it wasn't until about two years ago that we felt like it was the right time for us to invest. At almost the same time, we were approached by the Memphis-Shelby County Office of Sustainability to apply for a national grant, along with the Assisi Foundation and the Hyde Family Foundations, to create a livability dashboard for the region. We felt like the two sites would be most successful if they worked together and complemented each other. Once we received word that we had received the national grant, we moved forward designing the two sites together. The livability dashboard became WHEREweLIVEmidsouth.org and the DonorEdge site became WHEREtoGIVEmidsouth.org.

SCI: How do you see the websites being used?

Hayes: We have joked about this, but when people ask us who the end users are, the answer really might be *anybody*. We purposefully designed both sites to be extremely user friendly. So many other data sites that we had seen seemed to be built exclusively for data wonks. We wanted a person sitting at their kitchen table wondering what was going on in their neighborhood to find the site just as useful as a professor at the University of Memphis trying to create a profile for his class. So even though we think anyone in the community can use the sites, we think local nonprofits will use them to learn more about the communities they are serving, and more about the other nonprofits in our area. We think the sites will be invaluable tools to donors who are looking to strategically invest in the nonprofit sector. We think business leaders and government officials will find the sites useful in making decisions that affect our community. We are watching the usage of the sites very closely and hope to adapt how they function based on what we learn from users.

SCI: What kind of information can you find on the websites?

Hayes: These websites work together (1) to give Mid-Southerners access to information about their community and (2) to help them make decisions about how to impact the issues that are important to them. Unlike anything else in the Mid-South, these tools let people use data to drive change.

WHEREweLIVEmidsouth.org allows people to look at the Mid-South area in different ways – from a very regional, macro level, all the way down to the block where they live. The dashboard uses data from a variety of public sources to show people objective, current information on many different livability and health factors, such as, *How walkable is the area? How many parks and trails are nearby? Are there health clinics in the immediate vicinity?*

WHEREweLIVEmidsouth showcases data from both national and local sources. The site's interactive maps allow users to compare counties, cities, ZIP codes, or census tracts along hundreds of data sets. The data sets will be updated several times a year; and any community organization that needs a platform on which to showcase its data may request inclusion on the site.

WHEREtoGIVEmidsouth.org is a directory of nonprofit organizations in the Greater Memphis area. Organizations can create profiles for themselves and provide information about their mission, staff, major programs, and finances. There are currently almost 130 nonprofits listed in the WHEREtoGIVEmidsouth directory. Visitors to the site can search these profiles and find organizations that are working on issues important to them. *Do you want to know more about after-school tutoring programs in South Memphis? Or animal services agencies in East Memphis? Or environmental causes in Midtown?*

The financial data on WHEREtoGIVEmidsouth is imported directly from IRS Form 990 information presented via GuideStar, but the rest of the profile is built out by the individual nonprofits themselves. Since each profile is set up the same, users can compare nonprofits in a more apples-to-apples way than reviewing just their 990s or their websites.

WHEREtoGIVEmidsouth allows people to immediately make a financial contribution of any size to the nonprofits included in the directory. Community Foundation staff reviews all information submitted by the nonprofits for accuracy and clarity.

SCI: What makes the websites unique?

Hayes: As far as we can tell, there is no other system that works like this in the United States. There are sites that allow you to access data about your community, and there are sites that have nonprofit databases. But we can't find a system that connects the data that you learn about to the organizations that are working to solve the problems related to those data points. When our steering committee started designing these sites, we wanted to be able to carry people all the way through the learning process. Use WHEREweLIVEmidsouth to learn about your neighborhood, connect through that site to WHEREtoGIVEmidsouth to discover the organizations that are working in your neighborhood or in your particular area of concern, and then take action. Give to those nonprofits. Volunteer for those nonprofits. Call them up and ask them some questions. These sites equip citizens in this area unlike any other website or database that we have ever seen.

SCI: This initiative was a partnership of many entities in the city. Can you share some of those partners?

Hayes: I can safely say that the funding community has never come together to work on a project in the way that they have for this project. The Community Foundation has managed the project since the beginning, but without the contributions, both financially and with expertise, of the following organizations, this never would have been possible.

ArtsMemphis
Assisi Foundation
Thomas W. Briggs Foundation
Community Foundation of Greater Memphis
FedEx Corporation
First Tennessee Foundation
Sylvia Goldsmith Marks
Hope Christian Community FOundaiton
Hyde Family Foundations
Jewish Foundation of Memphis
Kemmons Wilson Family Foundation
Memphis Grizzlies Foundation
Memphis-Shelby County Office of Sustainability
Plough Foundation
Poplar Foundation
Pyramid Peak Foundation
United Way of the Mid-South
University of Memphis – Center for Applied Earth Science and Engineering Research
Urban Child Institute
Women’s Foundation for a Greater Memphis
Bloomberg Award for Partners for Places Grant Program – a project of the Funders’ Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities

SCI: How can we make a difference on the lives of Memphians?

Hayes: Memphis, like all major cities, is a city with a lot of problems that need to be tackled. There are a lot of bright spots, but the fact remains that there is work left to be done. It can be daunting to think about and figure out where you plug in. I think the best think you can do is learn as much about the problems that face our city as possible, connect with the organizations that are working on the problems that you most want to see solved, and take action with those organizations. Your time can be just as valuable as your money. Don’t let other people tell you what the issues are or what the “good” nonprofits are. Find out for yourself. These sites were designed for anyone to be able to do that. The worst thing you can do is to ignore our issues or think that someone else is working on it. Everyone has something to give, you just need to find the right place to plug in the resources that you bring to the table.

The websites WHEREweLIVEmidsouth.org and WHEREtoGIVEmidsouth.org are valuable resources for our community. Check them out for yourselves and see the impact you can have.