COMPANION ATHLETICS
Connecting kids in the East African community with STEM education through basketball

EDUCATION
Powering the love of math in low-income communities

HEALTH & WELLNESS
Improving the health of our community with a whole-person approach

Brothers Kareem and Yacub Abdi get more out of Companion Athletics than basketball.
In this issue of Heart & Science, we take a closer look at health and education. These two elements of a healthy community are inextricably woven together and interrelated. We know that our kids' opportunities can be severely constrained without good health or educational success. We know that education is a key part of better health and wellness, particularly through preventative approaches.

Our education story spotlights the importance of staying on track in school through the gateway of a popular basketball league and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) opportunities in our local East African immigrant community. We also share the innovative work of Zeno Math, which is building confidence and curiosity in math skills with low-income families and communities of color.

Our health and wellness feature reveals how the social determinants of health, such as income, geography, race, education and more, may matter more than genetics or access to care when it comes to health outcomes.

Powering Change shares the deep experience and perspective of our board member, Janet Levinger, and her impact investor husband, Will Poole, on how we must push educational systems to more creatively and effectively meet the needs of students.

Another Powering Change features the life-changing impact of Dr. Lewis Zirkle, whose SIGN Fracture Care International is improving health for thousands of patients around the developing world by healing broken bones with affordable implants.

Enjoy this issue of Heart & Science, which speaks to the power of education and different pathways to good health.

In partnership,
Tony Mestres, President & CEO
Heart & Science

Of Note

Bright Ideas

The players of the Seattle Seahawks have created a first-of-its kind fund with Seattle Foundation: the Seahawks Players Equality & Justice for All Action Fund. The Fund, which players, team leaders, individuals and fans are contributing to, will support education and leadership programs addressing equality and justice.

The Foundation is proud to support this effort and partner with the team, which is taking a bold step by investing in solutions that aim to build a more compassionate and inclusive society.

The Fund also demonstrates a deep commitment beyond the peaceful demonstration that some Seahawks and NFL players have engaged in for the past year. Those actions have helped to raise awareness and spark meaningful conversations about racial inequality and injustice.

Seattle Foundation received the inaugural philanthropy award from International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Seattle for transforming our community through philanthropy and generosity, and supporting immigrants and refugees as they make a new life in a new country. President and CEO Tony Mestres accepted the award at a dinner celebration on Oct. 13. Starbucks was also honored for humanitarian leadership and two individuals were recognized for their work with victims of human trafficking. The IRC responds to the world’s worst humanitarian crises, helping people whose lives have been shattered by conflict and disaster survive and build a future.

Closer Look

Edward Curtis Sesquicentennial

In 2018, more than 20 Northwest organizations and tribes will use the photography of Edward S. Curtis to spark discussions about art, culture and place. The year-long sesquicentennial commemoration, “Beyond the Frame,” will feature exhibitions, educational programs and other events at multiple sites. Seattle Foundation is proud to be a fiscal sponsor and participate in the organizing committee.

Curtis was a Seattleite who saw the need to document the culture and traditions of Native Americans, including many tribes in the Pacific Northwest. With the participation of more than 10,000 native people, Curtis took more than 40,000 images over 30 years to create his masterwork, The North American Indian, a 20-volume book set. This is a special opportunity for people to listen to Native voices, to engage anew with Curtis’ work, and with each other. It’s an opportunity to broaden our understandings about strength and resilience; power and perception; and identity.

Spotlight

SVP FastPitch Winners

Five winners of the FastPitch funding competition for emerging social innovators were announced on Oct. 24 at McCaw Hall.

The finals of this dynamic, fast-paced contest by Social Venture Partners featured 14 finalists pitching their ideas. In addition to sharing $100,000 in funding, the winners, as well as all of the participants, will benefit from expert guidance by seasoned entrepreneurs.

Here Are the Winners

High School Track:

University Track:

Nonprofit Startup:

Established Nonprofit:

For Profit:

InflammAid

HandiMaps

Unloop

Ready Set Vote, The Municipal League

BridgeCare Finance

To learn more or contribute, visit: www.seattlefoundation.org/seahawks
Companion Athletics connects kids in the East African community to coding, STEM education and leadership through basketball.

By Cynthia Flash / Photos by Dan DeLong

The founders of Companion Athletics had an ulterior motive when they enticed the young men of their East African community to crash the boards and bury jumpers on the basketball court: Hook the kids on B-ball, then teach them how to code.

An unlikely combination for these Muslim American-born children of Somali and Ethiopian refugees? Perhaps. But as Ayanle Ismail, co-founder and chairman of Companion Athletics, notes, Muslims have been bombarded with so much anti-Muslim rhetoric and the community needed something positive to talk about.

"I'm so happy my son has a mentor. I'm so happy he has this opportunity."

- Amran Dolali

"The goal of this program is getting these young men and women to pursue higher education. But the best way to bring people together is through sports, community potlucks and parties. So we looked at what kept us off the street when we were growing up. Creating positive environments kept us out of the street and we're just giving back the things that were given to us," Ismail said.
But basketball was only the beginning. The three-year-old nonprofit is also focused on creating a sense of community, developing leadership skills and providing STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Math) opportunities for youth. "We are not centered on basketball. We use it as a way to get our youth involved," board member Hassan Wardere says. "What can you do to elevate it? We want to see all of these kids go to college, make them critical thinkers."

On a recent Saturday night, 10 teams of middle and high school boys turned out to the SeaTac Community Center for five games of hoops. As the young men ran the gym, making layups and shouldering past each other, their fathers, brothers, uncles and Companion Athletics leaders cheered them from the sidelines.

When Amran Dolali watches son Nabil Ahmed play basketball at the Chief Sealth High School gym, she sits in the bleachers with the other fans. But here, with other Somali immigrants modestly covered from head to foot, she prefers to sit segregated with other women out of respect for her culture.

"The brothers with me helped me understand. It intrigued me so I wanted to come back. It made me see what the people at Microsoft do."

Kareem Abdi, 17, who played basketball for Kentwood High School in ninth grade, appreciates that cultural embrace of the Companion Athletics league. "We had a holiday called Eid and didn't play during that time," he says. "I never had experience in it;" he says. "The brothers with me helped me understand. It intrigued me so I wanted to come back. It made me see what the people at Microsoft do."

Dolali, whose son and daughter Najma also participated in the coding class, immigrated with her husband to the United States from Somalia in the 1990s and hopes for a better life for their U.S.-born children.

"I don't know what the future holds. You're always worried," she confides, acknowledging that some of the East African kids belong to gangs or are sitting...
in jail. Her children joined Companion Athletics after she saw an ad on the Internet. She appreciates the leadership the adults offer to help the kids stay out of trouble and expand their horizons. “I hope they go to university or college. I’m so happy my son has a mentor. I’m so happy he has this opportunity.”

In fact, many of the adults who give long volunteer hours to Companion Athletics, like Abdrahman Kariye and Khadija Noor, wish they had access to a similar program when they were growing up.

“There are so many people who are willing to be part of this and to give back,” said Kariye, an imam at a nearby mosque. “There are also challenges like racism and other things that these kids have to find their way through. And I believe Companion Athletics really gives them that path, that understanding. It gives them knowledge to deal with these kind of situations.”

Noor organizes programs for girls, including a leadership series that touches on career opportunities and professionalism in the workplace.

“In our community, the boys are the ones that are front and center and the girls are the ones who shy away, either doing their schooling or helping out their mothers, typically what they expect us to do,” she said. “I make sure to bring in girls and women speakers to motivate them and inspire them to see that could be you one day. We talk about some of the career paths that they want to have.”

The organization, which boasts nearly 400 basketball players, is expanding its coding program, recognizing how important STEM exposure and training is for the kids’ development and career opportunities.

The goal is to get more students involved in the coding and leadership classes to increase their chances for education and career success in the future.

The nonprofit also works to create partnerships with local companies to bring volunteers to the program or provide internships to the youth. “How can we create a collaborative piece to help our youth in the community branch off to greater things? These are your future software developers,” said Wardere, who emigrated to the U.S. from Somalia as a boy and graduated from the University of Colorado. “This is more than a (basketball) league. We make sure we create leaders. We say: I’ll hold your hand today, but tomorrow I want you to be the ones who lead.”

A coding class at Companion Athletics has opened up new possibilities for kids. Gettyimages.

While the importance of STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Math) education is growing in the U.S., there are significant gaps between job opportunities and graduates who are ready for them. In the next decade, many of the 30 fastest-growing jobs will require some STEM skills.

The organization serves about 400 youth of East African origin in Seattle and King County with basketball and soccer leagues, coding classes, leadership classes, community events and more. The volunteer-run nonprofit and three partners received an Engagement Pipeline grant from Seattle Foundation to strengthen the voice of the East African immigrant and refugee community.

For more information, visit www.caseattle.org

Companion Athletics’ first coding class was a hit, with more than 100 youth applying for 25 spots. The organization serves about 400 youth of East African origin in Seattle and King County with basketball and soccer leagues, coding classes, leadership classes, community events and more. The volunteer-run nonprofit and three partners received an Engagement Pipeline grant from Seattle Foundation to strengthen the voice of the East African immigrant and refugee community.
When four-year-old Austin Lau plays with the cards, blocks and trucks he got from the teacher who visited his house, he doesn’t know he’s doing math. He simply sorts the pieces. Or counts the wheels. These are fun games he enjoys nearly every day with his mother Heidy on the floor of their south Seattle home. “He loves it. He can count to 100,” says Heidy, who came to Seattle from China two years ago. “For the blocks he builds different shapes, castles. He has a match game. Every week we get an activity.”

Those activities and games are distributed to Austin and other preschoolers by Zeno, a small nonprofit focused on improving kids’ math confidence and abilities with engaging and interactive games. The goal is to excite young children about math before they enter grade school — to make sure they are ready to learn more and have a positive attitude about math from the beginning.

Zeno focuses on low-income communities. In its MathWays for Early Learning program, Zeno partners with family service providers such as preschools, home visiting programs and other community organizations to provide math game kits to families. It hosts Family Math Nights in schools it partners with and hosts semi-annual MathFests, a celebration of math play open to the public.

Just as literacy programs aim to get books into homes to support parents reading to their children, Zeno works to bring math play and activities into homes, says executive director Julie Marl.

“Just as literacy programs aim to get books into homes to support parents reading to their children, Zeno works to bring math play and activities into homes.”
- Julie Marl, executive director, Zeno Math

Zeno’s MathWays for Early Learning program is seeing strong demand. Last year, this program served 500 families of preschool-age children. It expects to serve 1,500 families this year — mainly in King, Pierce and Snohomish Counties.

“It’s amazing that she remembers those shapes that I couldn’t even say when I was that age,” says Helen Altamurano-Tang, whose three-year-old daughter Phoebe plays Zeno games with her older sisters. “Can you say ‘parallelogram’?” Helen asks Phoebe.

“Parallelogram,” Phoebe answers proudly before returning to her Zeno-provided transportation toys. “Zeno helps her to familiarize those shapes, those colors, those numbers,” Helen says. “She’s really excited to be more active in learning.”

Research shows that early math skills are a better predictor of later academic success than literacy or social emotional skills. “It’s about building a kid’s math foundation, so they can have the opportunity for greater success throughout their academic career,” said Marl. “By building a strong foundation in math, kids have so many more doors open to them down the road.”

Jesse Gilliam, communications director for Washington STEM, agrees. “We work with Zeno because we feel young people throughout Washington state really deserve and need the tools to prepare for their future,” he said. “Because our economy and world are increasingly digitally focused and focused on using STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) skills, we believe that STEM education is needed to get these folks there. It’s not only for the economy, but for life and interacting with the world.”
Q. Who or what inspires you?

A. I had not really been exposed to extreme poverty growing up here. I went to a neighborhood in Alabama that was a community of tar paper shacks. There was a young African American boy on the porch, probably 3 or 4, and I just spark to little kids, so I was trying to talk to him. And there was no spark, there was no joy. The challenge of his circumstances were written all over his face and it was heartbreaking. And I juxtaposed that against my own family of immigrant parents, who always said, ‘You can be anything you want.’ He became this symbol of all the racial discrimination and oppression and challenges that I was seeing that stood in such stark contrast to what my parents taught me about possibility and opportunity. I feel as though my life’s work has been about reconciling the two.

As executive director of the Children’s Alliance, Paola Maranan leads an organization that advocates for better public policies and practices that improve the lives of Washington’s children. Maranan, who grew up in Seattle, is a graduate of Harvard University and worked on voting rights in Montgomery, Alabama, prior to her role at the Children’s Alliance for the past 20 years. The nonprofit’s policy priorities include improving early education and health care access, and decreasing hunger for children — always through a lens of racial and ethnic equity.

Q. Why is it challenging to enact policies that truly address kids’ needs?

A. As a culture, we are really sentimental about children, and yet we do such a terrible job around fulfilling that sentiment. We pay a lot of lip service about wanting kids to succeed and kids being our future, but if you examine our public policies and investments, they do not bear out what we say. The work ahead - for all of us in our respective roles - is to deconstruct the systems that perpetuate racism and that create a big gap between where kids are and the opportunities they should have. That’s why we center racial equity in our advocacy work.

Q. Why is early learning support so important and a key focus of the Children’s Alliance?

A. We think of early learning broadly as not just what happens in formal settings, but as the experiences of young children and families. Early learning is the way we try to support families and young children by giving those children the best boost possible as they prepare to enter school, and as school prepares them for life. It’s a prime period of growth for children in brain development and social-emotional growth. So much of what kids call on later is developed in the early years. It’s such a critical time for us to think broadly about what it means to support young children and to make sure that support is there for all kids.

Q. What is a key issue for you in improving the health of kids here?

A. We were instrumental in the work to make sure every child in Washington state has access to health care and we are committed to protecting this coverage against emerging threats. It’s critically important to make sure kids have access to preventative care, and the health care they need. What we’re looking at now is the quality of that health care. And really looking at what drives racial inequities, and what drives the unequal access to care and the gaps we see in kids’ health outcomes.

Q. What is the next priority or greatest challenge for you?

A. If we don’t address childhood poverty and we don’t recognize the intersection between poverty, race and opportunity, we will never get where we want to go as a state, we’ll never secure opportunity for Washington’s children.
When Suet Chin moved to Seattle from Guangdong, China, 27 years ago, she found a second home at an unlikely place: the doctor’s office. With nurses who spoke her language and support for all aspects of her family life, Chin gave birth to four children and raised them to adulthood with the help of International Community Health Services, or ICHS.

When she had her first baby at ICHS and had little family support, the nurses supplied baby clothes and food. As her children got older, ICHS provided nutrition support and employment services for them. Now, her entire extended family of 20 all receive care from ICHS, including her father, who is being treated for Parkinson’s Disease. “I feel like ICHS can provide good service and a variety of service,” she said through an interpreter. “Whenever I need something, I just have to call and they know my family really well.”

This approach to providing wraparound support for a family’s full spectrum of needs is not by accident. Long before “social determinants of health” were buzzwords in public health circles, ICHS offered its clients a broad range of support, from culturally
appropriate care with in-language navigation, to food security programs, health-insurance assistance, food assistance, and culturally-specific programs for elders, youth, children and families.

Social determinants of health are the factors and conditions in which people live, work and age that affect their health, including socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, education, environment, employment, sexual orientation, social networks and access to health care.

ICHSS serves the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities of King County, addressing those social determinants of health broadly.

Rana Amini, health advocacy manager at ICHS, describes their approach as giving clients the keys to open different doors, based on their needs, with 13 bilingual community advocates serving as the guides. That includes a wide range of help across those social determinants, from connecting clients with resources to find a job, affordable housing, English classes and more.

ICHSS began in the early 1970s as a small, grassroots effort to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate care to Asian American and Pacific Islander clients. It was the first clinic in the country to do so, and has since grown from a humble storefront into an eight-location health organization with mobile and school-based clinics. ICHSS now serves nearly 29,000 patients, 74 percent of whom are Asian American. Sixty percent are low income and 55 percent use interpretive services. Their clinics provide medical, dental, behavioral health, and soon, vision care.

While most of our national conversation centers on the fight over access to health insurance, there is good reason to look at social determinants as the foundation of good health. According to research from the Kaiser Family Foundation, health care accounts for just 10 percent of factors leading to premature death, vs. 90 percent from social and environmental causes, individual behavior and genetics.

King County Public Health Officer Jeff Duchin, M.D., said it’s critical to look beyond health care to improve health outcomes. He said a person’s ZIP code can be more revealing than his or her genetic code. “We know that in the U.S., people with higher incomes live longer and healthier lives than people with lower incomes. This is an important issue because our goal as public health professionals is to have all

"Health care should never be an issue of money or background, never an issue of whether or not they have the right papers. It’s a universal right."

- Teresita Batayola, CEO, ICHS

Longtime patient Suet Chin gets her blood pressure taken at the International District Clinic.

Social Determinants of Health

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Health Outcomes

Mortality, Morbidity, Life Expectancy, Health Care Expenditures, Health Status, Functional Limitations

Source: Kaiser Family Foundation
people have equal opportunities to live healthy and fulfilled lives. Understanding the causes of these health inequities or differences in health outcomes is an important way for us to begin to address them."

ICHS CEO Teresita Batayola believes access to care is an issue of social justice and that everyone has a right to health care that makes a difference for them. "It should never be an issue of money or background, never an issue of whether or not they have the right papers. It’s a universal right. What people are so shortsighted about is that the health of the person in the next house, the next chair to you, affects you. If somebody does not have access to care, it will become a public health issue."

Batayola says a key part of the center’s success is connecting with patients on a personal level. "ICHS is a medical home, which means that we provide service through a team. Our goal is for our patients, especially due to language and culture issues, to bond with someone on the team."

ICHS patient Lucia Leandro Gimeno knows firsthand the impact of this approach. Gimeno, who describes himself as an Afro-Latinx, trans-masculine femme (he was born a female, and currently identifies in the middle of the masculine and feminine gender spectrum), came to ICHS after three weeks in the hospital following a diagnosis of end-stage kidney failure. He said the difference in ICHS’s care was immediately apparent. "My primary care physician was the first doctor that ever asked me ... ‘How are you doing with all of these changes?’ And I literally almost burst into tears." Gimeno said. It was one of the first times a doctor had inquired about his mental health, not just his physical health. The doctor offered counseling support through ICHS. "He was always super competent and great about the medical stuff, but also was really kind and compassionate," Gimeno says.

While he will need a kidney transplant, Gimeno’s health has stabilized through ICHS and he credits it to the whole-person approach and excellent care. "The people are so thoughtful and caring. They are always asking, ‘Do you need anything else?’ and ‘How can we support you?’" he said. "I’ve just figured out through my health crisis that the difference between life and death is whether people respect you and listen to you."

ICHS’ programs and supports go beyond health advice. "ICHS does not believe you can just tell somebody ‘Have a healthier meal,’ and that’s enough when you don’t give them a checklist of healthy foods," Amini said. They provide a health educator who translates menus so clients can understand how to replace ingredients like tofu for beef or pork, and how to cook it. "We are personalizing that step to meet the needs of the people. In our clinics, we have food cabinets because we know some of our patients have not eaten for several days," Amini said. "We have Community Advocates that can help them get food stamps but we don’t let them go out without any food."

Patients enjoy social time, conversation and a healthy meal through ICHS’ community kitchen events.
A group walking program in which clients travel together to locate services and resources.

A community kitchen where clients learn how to make affordable, healthy, culturally-appropriate foods.

A program for preschool-age children to make healthy snacks and learn healthy food choices early.

A tai chi class.

A line-dancing class that provides diabetes education for elders.

Non-partisan voter education and engagement to support civic participation.

Duchin of King County Public Health says it’s critical to engage in these kinds of upstream approaches. “In general, the poorer a person is and the poorer the neighborhood they live in, the more they struggle to meet the basic needs of life and have access to healthy food and recreation, safe neighborhoods and so on, the more difficult it is for them to achieve good health,” he said.

According to a recent study in the medical journal, The Lancet, disparities in health outcomes for King County are dramatic. While life expectancy in King County overall is among the highest in the country, wealthier communities have the highest life expectancy, at 14 to 18 years greater than that of the poorest communities.

To tackle challenges like that, King County is participating in a five-year regional health effort called the Accountable Community of Health, or ACH. One of nine efforts across the state, the King County ACH is taking aim at social determinants of health to improve care and better use resources as part of the restructuring of Medicaid. Batayola is part of the leadership council overseeing this initiative.

Amini, who has a background in global and public health, acknowledges that successes in tackling social determinants can be hard to quantify. She said it’s like trying to find a pill to stop youth suicide when what makes a difference is addressing the underlying issues. “If you want to get to the root of all of this, we need to go back to the community and try to change the root cause of the problem. Because the pill won’t solve the pandemic. We need to do something else.”

International Community Health Services provides culturally appropriate health care in a multitude of languages to improve health and outcomes of Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders and the broader community.

www.ichs.com

HOW LONG YOU LIVE MIGHT DEPEND ON YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD IN KING COUNTY

Average lifespans vary widely across King County

MEN

Auburn 68.4 yrs.
Clyde Hill 86.7 yrs.

WOMEN

Auburn 73.6 yrs.
Bryant 88.4 yrs.

While life expectancy in King County overall is among the highest in the country, wealthier communities have the highest life expectancy, at 14 to 18 years greater than that of the poorest communities. In 2014, average life expectancy in King County was 79.3 years among men and 83.3 years among women, placing King County in the 95th percentile for men and 93rd percentile for women, among all counties, in terms of life expectancy. Within King County, average life expectancy among men ranged from a low of 68.4 years in a Census tract in Auburn to a high of 86.7 years in Clyde Hill. Life expectancy among women ranged from a low of 73.6 years, also in a Census tract in Auburn, to a high of 88.4 years in the Bryant neighborhood in northeast Seattle.

Source: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation
The smiling faces of the formerly hobbled are what Dr. Lewis Zirkle treasures: a teenager in Myanmar whose leg was broken in a motorcycle accident while making deliveries as the family’s sole breadwinner; the doctor in Ethiopia who was hit by a car three weeks after medical school, then healed by Zirkle’s SIGN implant.

The need for Dr. Zirkle’s bone-healing technology is great. In much of the developing world, medical facilities lack equipment that is standard here and power may be intermittent or non-existent. At the same time, collisions are an epidemic, leaving a trail of crippled patients in their wake.

"More people die from road traffic accidents than from AIDS, hepatitis and malaria combined," said Zirkle.

"The irony here is that as poverty decreases, accidents rise, because there are more motorbikes and cars on the roads."

- Dr. Lewis Zirkle

To bring quality health care to these patients, Dr. Zirkle and other volunteers travel to developing countries to train surgeons to repair broken limbs. SIGN provides the implants and instruments for free or at cost.

There are now SIGN teams in more than 50 countries, who record their procedures in a digital database, which Zirkle uses to review several hundred cases a day. More than 200,000 patients around the world have been healed by SIGN Surgery to date.

Zirkle, 77, was raised in Massachusetts until moving as a teenager to North Carolina. His father, an engineer at General Electric, also ran a goat farm.

"He taught me so much there. He also got me a job at a lumber company where I was the only white guy. And, he taught me to treat everybody equally," said Zirkle, who brings humility and a thirst for learning to his work.

Zirkle wanted to be a carpenter, and liked working with his hands, but his coursework at Davidson College led him on a path to medical school at Duke University. Then, following a year of orthopedic residency, he was drafted for the war in Vietnam, where he despaired at the inhumanity of combat.

Years later, after settling in Richland with a thriving orthopedic practice, Zirkle was drawn back to Vietnam and Southeast Asia for week-long surgical clinics, donating his time to teach surgeons in-country.

At the bedside of a patient in Indonesia in 1986, he had an epiphany. The man had spent three years in the hospital, with his leg in traction. Zirkle said he had addressed this exact kind of case with the man’s doctor and asked why they couldn’t mend the leg.

"And, his answer stopped me short: He said, we can’t use your implants because we have power outages and we can’t use your equipment," Zirkle recounted.

"I realized with a sinking feeling that I had wasted 10 years intermittently. So, I said all right, I’ll work on this."

Zirkle returned to Richland, tinkering in his garage to find a different way to mend broken bones. He kept experimenting, then brought in engineers and machinists and built a manufacturing facility. He and his team created several steel nails with interlocking
screws that can be implanted mechanically with a device called a slot finder, so surgery can be performed without expensive equipment.

After incorporating SIGN in 1999, he built a formidable network of doctors trained in SIGN surgery. In just one example, the number of orthopedic surgeons in Ethiopia grew from three to nearly a hundred after Zirkle’s visits, and SIGN continues to provide implants and educational opportunities for them. A father of three and grandfather of nine, Zirkle now travels abroad several times a year to train and network with surgeons.

He believes patients around the world deserve equal care and the chance to live productive, healthy lives.

“In many countries, they get lesser treatment. They might wrap a fracture with bamboo splints and some salve on an open wound, which often causes more problems,” Zirkle said. “If it happens to the breadwinner or parent, the whole family spirals into poverty for three generations. So SIGN surgery is huge in the patient’s life.”

Janet Levinger and Will Poole are partners in life and philanthropy. Both have a deep commitment to children and education. He comes at it as an impact investor and technologist, finding ways to democratize learning and scale up teaching techniques. She comes at it as a parent who wanted her children’s and every child’s education to be stimulating.

The pair met at a house party when they were students at Brown University. She was an English major raised in Sioux City, Iowa by a retail store owner and a homemaker in a tightknit Jewish community. He was a computer science guy, the East Coast son of a professor and a stay-at-home mom.

After stints in Boston and the Bay Area, the couple moved to Bellevue when Microsoft purchased Poole’s startup company, eShop. Levinger ended her technology marketing firm to raise their two children. But, service soon beckoned.

She joined the board of Child Care Resources, which works to provide access to quality child care. Then her son’s experience in a poorly managed kindergarten class highlighted the importance of teacher quality and the systemic challenges in public schools. The day they decided to move their son to a private school, Levinger started volunteering with the Bellevue Schools Foundation. They tried public school again when their son was in sixth grade, but it wasn’t working any better for him so Levinger went all in. In 2002, Levinger and three co-leaders founded a new school, Eastside Prep, to provide a challenging curriculum and hands-on learning. She and Poole were its first donors.
This was no plush, high-tech academy. The building was leased. The desks were bought as scrap from a school district, then sanded and painted. Teachers built close relationships and ate with their students, who were invited to give feedback. The school started with 17 students in sixth and seventh grades. It now has 420, with plans to grow to 500.

Levinger did the marketing and fundraising, while others oversaw finances, academics and administration.

"Put it this way," Poole said, "I was a senior vice president at Microsoft at the time and she was working as hard as I was."

"What kept us going was a vision of a really different type of school, one that was focused on really strong critical thinking but also on the social-emotional side. And we wanted a very interdisciplinary, experiential approach because people learn best that way," said Levinger.

"One thing that Janet and I have learned is that if you don’t invest in selecting, training, supporting and retraining really good teachers, you’re wasting your time," said Poole. "It doesn’t matter what tech or other resources you’ve got; you have to have effective teachers."

Poole also brought the Fast Pitch social innovation competition to Seattle for Social Venture Partners, which connects and invests in people and organizations to create sustainable, just communities. Levinger and Poole became early members in 1997, drawn to the thoughtful combination of giving and action rather than just check writing.

"As we’ve gone through our journey in philanthropy, at each stage there have been partners, friends and colleagues who are thinking about the same things: how you go from direct service to systems change, how you focus your giving to have more impact," said Levinger, who also co-founded Eastside Pathways, a collective impact effort to support kids and families to be successful in school and life.

Now, their journey moves to an exciting new stage as they expand their family philanthropy through Seattle Foundation to their adult children, William and Sarah. This next generation is also passionate about education and reforming unjust systems, in addition to the environment and reproductive rights.

An Evolving Journey

A decade ago, Levinger realized that giving to a wide array of programs wasn’t effective. So she concentrated her giving, particularly in education, and took an upstream approach to increasing equity.

Poole focuses on impact investing in developing countries. One of his ventures is Hippocampus Learning Centres, the largest preschool program in rural India. It provides an affordable high-quality program and trains primary school teachers. "Talk about a great place to figure out how to scale up with one billion people," Poole says.

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Janet Levinger has served on the boards of 15 nonprofits, including United Way of King County, the League of Education Voters, Thrive Washington and the King County Youth and Children Advisory Board. She is a member of Seattle Foundation’s Board of Trustees, chairing the community programs committee. Will Poole is managing partner of Capria (www.capria.vc), a global impact investing firm that funds companies that create positive social impact while earning market-rate returns.
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Philanthropy is a powerful way to bring family together around the shared values of generosity and community. Seattle Foundation provides customized philanthropic advising and community insights that enable your family philanthropy to be a powerful and effective way to build ties across generations and invest in meaningful community impact.

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This photo of Nani by Athena J highlights the universality of struggles for people of color, from Standing Rock to the Black Lives Matter movement. Athena is a participant in Creative Justice, an arts-based alternative to youth incarceration that received a Resilience Fund grant from Seattle Foundation in 2017.