

Monday, Mar 23, 2020

## Midwest transplant helping to improve well-being of Rochester-area folks

By: Nicole Sheldon | March 20, 2020

Matt Kuhlenbeck came from humble beginnings. At 16, his first job was working as a fry cook at McDonalds. Throughout college he built houses and worked steel, a field he loved. Now, at 41, he oversees a \$250 million endowment as president and CEO of the Greater Rochester Health Foundation.



Matt Kuhlenbeck

Prior to joining GRHF in January 2019, Kuhlenbeck spent 14 years at the Missouri Foundation for Health, serving the last seven years as program director. Born in Iowa and raised in Illinois, Kuhlenbeck is a Midwesterner at heart. But he and his family felt pulled to the East Coast to be closer to his wife's family.

Before Kuhlenbeck, GRHF had just one CEO, John Urban, since its founding 14 years ago. When Urban stepped down and the position opened up, Kuhlenbeck couldn't find any reasons not to relocate his family to Rochester.

"I ended up falling in love with Rochester," he said. "There's very much a Midwest vibe here; everybody's incredibly nice, and it's an area where it's clear that when there's a challenge everyone's willing to roll up their sleeves and try to address it."

Kuhlenbeck, his wife, Amanda, and their two children now reside in Webster. Before deciding where to settle, Kuhlenbeck stayed in different Airbnbs around Rochester, including Greece, Henrietta and the City of Rochester, to get a feel for the community while waiting for his children to finish the school year so his family could join him.

Louis Papa M.D., professor of clinical medicine at the University of Rochester Medical Center and board chair for GRHF, was a member of the search committee for Urban's replacement. He said Kuhlenbeck checked all of the boxes.

"We wanted someone who had a lot of foundation experience and would help us give a fresh look to our strategic plan, and Matt has done that," says Papa. "Matt is very young-looking, and when we first saw him we wondered how he was going to run this foundation, but he's got a lot of wisdom. It's remarkable how insightful and how strategic he is with his thinking."

The GRHF is a health legacy foundation formed in 2006 from the merger of two nonprofits: Preferred Care and MVP Health Care. Preferred Care's value—\$230 million—remained a public asset, so GRHF is a private independent corporation that operates with a public mindset. The \$230 million from Preferred Care has been invested in the stock market and has grown to around \$250 million, though the endowment has experienced some regression due to the coronavirus's impact on Wall Street.

On an annual basis, 5 percent of the endowment is distributed to support public health care across the nine counties the GRHF serves—Monroe; Genesee; Orleans; Wyoming; Livingston; Ontario; Wayne; Yates; and Seneca. On average, GRHF dispenses between \$8 million and \$11 million in grants annually. In 2019, GRHF worked with 103 organizations and invested approximately \$9.3 million in health care for the Greater Rochester region.

GRHF focuses its grant making in three portfolios.

"The first is what I call targeted grant making, and that's where we pick an issue of some kind and identify organizations that want to work with us to affect change," explains Kuhlenbeck. "The two areas we're currently working on are healthy futures—working on addressing health outcomes for kids age zero to eight, particularly looking at behavioral health, trauma and the effects of neighborhood conditions on outcomes—and the other part is called neighborhood improvement."

In 2020, GRHF is working with two rural communities for their neighborhood improvement initiative. Kuhlenbeck and his staff of 13 have chosen to geographically isolate their work, and they've given the floor to the two communities to tell the foundation what's most important to them, what their needs are and what their vision is for a health community.

The second portfolio is responsive grant making, which includes community health and opportunity grant programs. GRHF offers an open door for organizations seeking resources—not just monetarily, but as a community partner—to address health issues in the community.

The partnership portfolio is the final portfolio, in which GRHF collaborates with other funders and community organizations to work toward health solutions. Collaboration in this space often includes event sponsorships and

supporting health-related nonprofits advance their goals.

GRHF recently relocated to 255 East Ave. after spending many years at 150 State St. According to Kuhlenbeck, the team outgrew the space and it was not conducive to the collaborative environment he is trying to establish. ^

Kuhlenbeck notes that much of his time is spent outside of the office and that he prefers to meet with community partners in their work space to get a better sense of the organization.

"I always want to be in their location, see their work. I stopped counting last May the individual meetings I was having because it was well over 100 in the first five months," he says. "My expectation is that we as an organization are out participating in the work and being true collaborators on a day-to-day basis."

Though GRHF team members spend most of their time meeting with community organization leaders face-to-face, all staff are now working remotely for the foreseeable future in response to the CDC's social distancing recommendations to prevent the spread of COVID-19. GRHF has transitioned in-person meetings to conference calls and virtual meetings. Additionally, foundation staff are working on implementing processes to ensure that grant fund distribution will continue with little disruption.

Kuhlenbeck defines the GRHF staff as incredibly community-oriented, and he has been described the same way by his peers. From the outset, Kuhlenbeck made an effort to continue to establish GRHF in the community and immediately went out and introduced himself to key players in the field.

One such organization Kuhlenbeck quickly got involved with was the Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative (RMAPI).

"Matt's not the type of person to advise from the sidelines. This is not a spectator sport," says Leonard Brock, executive director of RMAPI. "He also wants his entire leadership team to be involved in RMAPI too. He appoints leaders within his organization to serve on various committees at RMAPI. It's not just a volunteer thing for him; he's really brought in the work that's needed to change Rochester."

Working with organizations like RMAPI coincides with GRHF's updated mission that Kuhlenbeck was able to spearhead in just a year's time: To pursue and invest in solutions that build a healthier region where all people can thrive.

"As we went through this mission refresh, we thought about how we need to be strategic, how we need to look upstream," he says. "Depending on what you look at, 80 to 90 percent of what impacts somebody's health happens outside of the medical system, so we want to focus on that 80 to 90 percent so we can reduce the need for expenditure on that 10 to 20 percent."

By looking upstream, Kuhlenbeck is referring to the social determinants of health, such as income, social status, employment, working conditions and physical environments, to name a few. Essentially, GRHF is focused on how it can maximize the resources it has to have the greatest impact in the long run.

With this refreshed mission, the center of GRHF's work is on equity both within the organization and how that translates into its work in the nine counties it serves.

"From a long-term perspective, we're looking at how we create positive, meaningful improvements in health in this region," says Kuhlenbeck. "We know we're just a drop in the bucket when it comes to what's being spent on health and health care in the region when we're working with a particular organization or on a targeted initiative, but we use our expertise and resources to have a positive effect."

Dealing with the social determinants of health is a daunting task for any organization, but GRHF recognizes that if it continues to focus on only fighting diseases, it will never get to the root of the issues. However, the roots of those challenges are deeply entrenched in society.

"Those upstream pieces that we're looking at are big and require work on systems and policies that need to be adjusted, some of which we can absolutely have an impact on," says Heidi Burke, chief program officer at GRHF. "But we're only going to have an impact as long as we have others working with us in those spaces, because when it comes down to it, our dollars will not go as far as these issues are entrenched, so it's going to take a long time."

None of the issues GRHF is focused on can be solved overnight, and Brock asserts that the community needs to be patient as the organization continues to get situated under Kuhlenbeck's leadership.

"We have to give Matt and the organization time," stresses Brock. "People will start placing expectations on Matt and the organization before they're able to experiment with the things that will work and the things that won't work. He's from outside the community and he can bring a lot of value to this community if we embrace him, work with him and give him the room he needs to experiment."

Kuhlenbeck says that his leadership style is centered on coaching, mentoring and development. He strives to make sure his employees have the tools they need to succeed and steps out of the way.

"Matt has a great way of communicating. He leads, but also desires input and support from all staff," says Burke. "I think it's commendable that in less than a year's time we've been able to adjust our mission and values. That's something we've looked at and considered doing over my 10 years here and he was able to accomplish that in a year, which is very telling."

Burke says she appreciates Kuhlenbeck's partnership. She adds that he's approachable and an excellent listener, and decisions aren't made without input from various viewpoints and information.

Papa concurs, saying that Kuhlenbeck considers all perspectives before acting in a structured and process-oriented manner.

"He wants to make it so that if he was hit by a bus tomorrow someone could step in and say 'Okay, I've got this, I know where we're going from here,' in every aspect," says Papa. "I think that's a fantastic skill-set as a CEO."

Brock labels Kuhlenbeck as an "adaptive leader" who doesn't sit back on the sidelines.

"Leadership for me is a byproduct of a person's willingness to learn and change," says Brock. "From what I've known of Matt since he's been here is that he has a high teachability index, meaning he's very willing to learn and change. Those are the key ingredients for a very effective and impactful leader that can spur change that we haven't seen."

Looking back on his career so far, Kuhlenbeck says one of his proudest professional accomplishments was moving the needle on tobacco control in Missouri. Missouri is the state with the lowest tax on tobacco and has zero smoke-free laws. The Missouri Foundation for Health was the only entity spending money on the cause, and Kuhlenbeck witnessed a drastic and statistically significant decline in tobacco use in the state over the 10 years he worked on the initiative.

"We increased smoke-free environments from less than half a percent to over 40 percent," says Kuhlenbeck. "Because we were the only ones investing in it we could attribute 90 percent of that to the work that we were supporting, and I was fortunate to be a part of that work."

In philanthropy there tends to be a frequent change in focus, and Kuhlenbeck saw that as soon as the Missouri Foundation for Health stopped investing in tobacco control. The positive changes began reversing.

"That's an important lesson for the work we're doing here and understanding how you effectively maintain momentum that you've been able to gain," says Kuhlenbeck.

In addition to his work as a member of the steering committee for RMAPI, Kuhlenbeck is a convener member for ROC the Future, a board member for the Rochester Economic Development Corp. and an advisory board member for NorthStar Network's Healthcare Business Academy Fellowship Program.

Kuhlenbeck says that ROC the Future is a natural space for him to be involved in as the leader of GRHF. Not only does the foundation bring in a perspective of privilege being a funder, but its work with various community organizations offers a lot of experiences to draw from to inform discussion and initiatives.

The Midwestern man has had an interest in health care since his college years, graduating from Northern Illinois University in 2000 with a bachelor's degree in community health. He went on to earn a master's degree in health care administration from St. Louis University in 2002.

Currently, Kuhlenbeck is finishing up his Ph.D. in health management and policy from St. Louis University. He expects to graduate in May.

When he's not out in the community for GRHF, he's exploring the Greater Rochester and Finger Lakes region with his family as they continue to adapt to their new home. Kuhlenbeck says he and his wife are big foodies, and the two appreciate the diverse local cuisine options.

Just one year into his tenure, Kuhlenbeck has started seeing wins, from updating the foundation's mission and values to formulating a strategic plan to investing over \$9 million in more than 100 local organizations. He says that if the foundation is viewed as a valued resource to improve community health, then GRHF is successful in his eyes.

"If we're able to get to the place where we're looked at as a thought partner and a co-conspirator then I think we've carved ourselves into a good space, because our intention is to be here forever and we intend to support this community for as long as we possibly can," says Kuhlenbeck. "We need to be able to build those positive and sustaining relationships that allow us to do that."

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## **Matt Kuhlenbeck**

**Position:** President and CEO, Greater Rochester Health Foundation

**Age:** 41

**Education:** Bachelor of science degree, community health, Northern Illinois University, 2000; master of health administration, St. Louis University, 2002; Ph.D., health management and policy, St. Louis University, 2020

**Home:** Webster

**Family:** Wife, Amanda; son, Brenden, 13; daughter, Madelyn, 8

**Hobbies:** Exploring Rochester and the Finger Lakes, trying out new restaurants, following the St. Louis Cardinals, playing video games with his son

**Quote:** "Depending on what you look at, 80 to 90 percent of what impacts somebody's health happens outside of the medical system, so we want to focus on that 80 to 90 percent so we can reduce the need for expenditure on that 10 to 20 percent."