



Arras Foundation board members, employees and interns celebrate the new name of Lancaster's leading philanthropic organization in July, when the former J. Marion Sims Foundation unveiled its new moniker and logo. The group stands in front of the entrance to its new building, which it hopes to move into in January.

Foundation reinvents itself

Lancaster's leading philanthropy has been reinventing itself over the last few years, culminating with changing its name this summer.

The former J. Marion Sims Foundation is now the Arras Foundation. Arras, a Middle English word meaning diverse tapestry, pays homage to the area's textile-weaving roots, said foundation President Susan DeVenny.

"We wanted to make sure the name reflected the spirit of the community, the spirit of what we do every day and the importance of serving all the individuals in the area together," she said.

Board member Richard Band said the new name reflects the foundation's mission.

"Your name makes a statement about who you are," Band said. "Arras is a tapestry. It signifies different threads woven together to make a strong fabric. It conveys the idea of moving forward for the good of the whole."

Back story

The J. Marion Sims Foundation was created in 1995 with \$52 million in proceeds from the sale of the nonprofit Elliott White Springs Memorial Hospital to hospital chain Community Health Services. The hospital was originally named Marion Sims Memorial Hospital, which is where the foundation's name came from.

Dr. James Marion Sims, born near Heath Springs in 1813, is known as the "Father of Modern Gynecology." He developed breakthrough tools and procedures in his field, but his research included experimental surgeries on enslaved women without their consent.

DeVenny, the foundation's president and CEO since 2015, said the foundation board started talking about changing the name in late 2017, after protesters in New York City demanded the removal of a statue of Sims from Central Park.

DeVenny said the foundation planned to announce the name change when the organization moves into its new headquarters in the old Springs Co. building on Main Street in the coming year. But she said current events overtook the plan to unveil the new name and the new location at the same time.

"The thought was to announce it when we move into the building, but we realized with everything going on in the world, it was our time to act," she said. "We want to make sure the new name reflects what we are doing."

Enlarging its mission

The foundation's mission is to support programs that enhance residents' health and wellness in Lancaster County, Fort Lawn and Great Falls, the communities served by the hospital.

It has distributed more than \$57 million in grants over the years, and its assets now total \$71 million, making it the ninth-largest philanthropic organization in South Carolina.

In 2016, the foundation established a North Star to guide its work: "We envision the communities we serve as places where everyone joins together to build on community assets for current and future generations, and where everyone has the opportunity to reach their full potential."

That year, the foundation asked for com-

munity input to help it shape its work going forward.

"We used that input to help us shape our new direction," DeVenny said.

The foundation now focuses on three pillars: Supporting and building a healthy community; helping youth successfully transition to adulthood; and elevating philanthropy.

To address these, the foundation has moved beyond just making grants to taking a more active role in facilitating community discussions and partnering with organizations that support a vibrant, healthy community. It started a youth internship program, college advising corps and a youth grants committee that helps award innovative education grants. It started Give Local Lancaster to give residents an active role in philanthropy. It partnered with the Orton Family Foundation to make the first Community Heart & Soul awards in Kershaw and Fort Lawn.

Since the onset of the coronavirus, the foundation has been hosting Zoom meetings for county officials and community leaders to swap information and strategize about how to get through the COVID-19 crisis. And it has partnered with the United Ways of Lancaster and Chester counties on Catawba Connect, a local COVID-19 rapid-response fund.

Jodie Plyler, Arras board chair, said this is an exciting, challenging time for the nonprofit.

"The foundation no longer just hands out checks, but has moved in a new direction with a deeper purpose," she said. "We want to be involved in solutions to improve overall health throughout the fabric of this community."