

Blank Foundation, One of the South's Biggest Philanthropies, Puts Focus on Housing, Environment, and More

By

focusing on the arts, early-childhood development, and parks and green spaces have been discontinued.

Blank, who turned 80 last year, has signed the Giving Pledge, which is a commitment to give away at least half of his wealth. *Forbes* estimates that Blank has amassed \$7.7 billion.

The Blank foundation does not have an endowment; instead its founder puts money in every year for the organization to give away.

Last year, the philanthropy made about \$100 million in grants and is expected to meet that mark this year, according to Fay Twersky, who took over as president of the foundation in 2021 after serving in leadership roles at the Hewlett and Gates foundations. That makes Blank one of the biggest grant makers in the south, joining the ranks of the Duke Endowment and the Robert M. Woodruff Foundation, which made about \$175 million and \$165 million in grants, respectively, in 2021.

The new strategy reflects greater input from Arthur Blank's son Kenny and his wife, Nancy, as well as daughter Dena Kimball and her husband, Josh, Twersky said.

Over the past several years, the family members got together several times a year to learn more about topics the philanthropy might focus on. They read essays, listened to podcasts, and heard from experts on climate change, mental health, civic engagement, and the history of Atlanta's neighborhoods.

“Before that, we had family members serving on the board, but the foundation over all tended to be a little bit more driven by Arthur's passions,” Twersky said. “The family

historically Black neighborhood from leaving as real-estate prices surge. Youth-development grants will support groups that provide job training, apprenticeships, and accreditation for people ages 14 to 24. And environment aid will encourage the development and use of renewable energy.

The foundation is still devising its approach on advancing democracy as well as how it will promote mental health and wellness.

In an interview, Twersky, who was involved in the formation of the New Pluralists, a fundraising collaborative that supports efforts to bring people of opposing viewpoints together, stressed that the foundation will try to support various approaches to solve problems.

For instance, she said, Blank's environment program had supported the Energy Foundation's work to educate lawmakers in the Southeast and Intermountain West about the benefits of clean energy. But it had also supported research by the Hoover Institution, a conservative think tank, on creating a market for renewable energy.

“It's quite important to think about our work across the board in a pluralistic way, but especially in climate because it is such a polarized field,” she said.

While the plan for the foundation's mental health and well being is not final, it has made some awards that signal its approach. Among them: a \$500,000 grant to the Carter Center to ensure landmark mental-health legislation signed into law in 2022 in Georgia helps as many state residents as possible.

Blank, who is also owner of the Atlanta Falcons football and Atlanta United soccer teams, has had a long relationship with former president Jimmy Carter, said Paige Alexander, the Carter Center's chief executive. She credited the Blank foundation with “seeing what's on the horizon” and understanding that Covid has had an impact on the mental health of people from all walks of life.

The Carter Center will use \$500,000 over the next year to publicize the availability of mental-health services and track consumer reaction, particularly among women and

BIPOC residents in Albany, a relatively rural area, and Savannah, Georgia's second largest city.

The idea, said Alexander, is to compare how mental-health policy affects city and rural residents differently and then to create marketing plans based on those findings statewide.

That work wouldn't be possible without the Blank gift, Peterson said. The center relies on small, incremental gifts from individuals and family foundations. The Blank gift, she said, is a 'game changer.'

'To have somebody like Blank step into this area means we can go to scale with lessons that we've learned, and that's huge,' she said.

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