

Cabbage Patch

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families could replace worn out clothes or launching a food pantry to tide households over to the next paycheck, she used her abundant resources to bolster the Patch and the neighborhood around it for 71 years.

Since her death four decades ago, it's continued that mission through a trust.

Over time the Patch has evolved into a modern nonprofit, but it's also unique in the sense that about 40% of its \$3 million annual operating budget comes from the trust that Marshall started decades ago as well as an assortment of other endowments. She never had children of her own, so she left her fortune to the organization that she'd founded and nurtured throughout her entire adult life.

Like a lot of charities, fundraising off-set expenses, but the Patch never relies on public dollars to meet its mission — meaning it is largely insulated from the ever-changing moods and priorities of the political sector.

Children must agree and adhere to the organization's behavior standards, but beyond that, there isn't a criteria or cost to become a member. For a long time, the organization mostly served families in the immediate Old Louisville area, but as homes nearby have shifted toward multi-unit dwellings, there are fewer children nearby.

These days, the organization tends to draw families from roughly a 3- to 5-mile radius, and in recent decades about 75% of members have a West End address, said Corey Miller, the executive director of the Patch.

Most families earn around \$30,000 a year, whereas the Living Wage Calculator says it takes nearly \$76,000 for a household to comfortably raise one child in Jefferson County.

"They're just short," Miller said of the families the organization serves. "There's a gap that's really difficult to close."

But it doesn't matter what zip code or household income a child comes from — the goal at the Patch is always the same.

The organization strives to improve the trajectory of a child's life, and in turn, the city of Louisville. Sometimes that means improving outcomes for the rest of the household, as well.

"Our youth face more barriers than many others," Miller said. "But they have incredible abilities and potential, and so we're here to help them really feel supported and connected."

The history of Cabbage Patch Settlement House

In the early 1900s, the Cabbage Patch referred to an area south of downtown Louisville where lower income residents grew their own vegetables.

Cabbage was a common crop and overtime, the nickname "the Cabbage Patch" stuck.

The neighborhood is loosely located along the southern edge of modern-day Old Louisville and the eastern part of the Park Hill neighborhood. The area gained national attention in the early 20th century novel "Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch," which told the story of a cheerful widow who overcame hardships while raising her five children.

The reality of the founding of the Cabbage Patch was much more grim.

First-hand accounts preserved in the book "The Cabbage Patch Settlement House Inc. As Told by Those Who Lived It" described the residents as "thin" and "small people" who "basically lived on cabbages and potatoes."

Families typically had six to 10 children, and many were so poor, they couldn't provide shoes for each child. So, in some cases, two or three children would take turns going to school by sharing the same pair of shoes. Most homes didn't have a bath of their own, so the residents wandered down to the public bath house on Seventh Street. When babies died, often they were buried in the front yard, as most families didn't have the means for a cemetery burial.

Marshall's father served as superintendent of a neighborhood Sunday school. As a young heiress, Marshall was expected to contribute to, and engage with society, but women of that era didn't linger in charitable situations. She taught Sunday school classes as a teenager, which fostered a sense of responsibility to the neighborhood.



Jacobie Wilson helps Elijah Byrd, Hannibal Ellis and Jonathan Gyton bake cookies at the Cabbage Patch Settlement House on July 10.

MICHAEL CLEVINGER/COURIER JOURNAL

Eventually, Marshall asked her father for \$500 in 1910 to buy a lot near Ninth and Burnett streets, so that she could build a house that could be a permanent home for charitable programs such as cooking and sewing classes.

That house, which became the Cabbage Patch Settlement House, hosted Bible classes, woodworking classes and clinics. Louisville Public Library opened a branch inside the house and children planted a garden in the front yard filled with radishes, lettuce and onions for the neighborhood to share, and the staff offered lessons on how to can and make preserves.

Marshall tapped her friends to teach sewing classes to the women, and she wrangled the young boys and coached basketball and baseball herself.

Attendance records show the house served 9,000 people between 1913-1914, and that figure ballooned to more than 18,400 in 1924-1925. In an effort to meet that growing need, Marshall relocated the Patch to its present location near Sixth and Magnolia Streets in 1930, just months after the Great Depression started.

When the men in the neighborhood proudly refused charity, the Patch found jobs for them. Wealthy families would call in looking for someone to scrub floors, wash walls and cut grass, and the Patch staff would connect the dots. They promoted their members as employable painters, wallpaper hangers, floor men, carpenters and plasterers.

One fundraising letter from the winter of 1934 tallies more than 1,300 people, who'd lost work.

"The numbers are appalling," the letter reads. "Hungry people cannot wait weeks for jobs. ... We beg of you, if you are planning to help someone in need, that you let them do a job for you, or someone else, instead of giving them charity."

With hunger in mind, Marshall launched a commissary in the organization's original building where workers baked bread and sold it for a cent. She used those funds to purchase canned goods in bulk to sell them at cost. The neighbors could come in with a basket and fill it with beans, margarine, corn meal, bacon and flour for just a dollar. She created an ongoing rummage sale where the neighbors could pay just enough for used clothes or furniture to keep their pride.

A few years later, during the Flood of 1937, the Patch's gymnasium shifted into a refuge for families who were evacuated from their homes.

Then as World War II raged in Europe, the need in the neighborhood shifted and grew. With fathers in the service and

The Cabbage Patch Settlement House

HOW TO GET HELP: To become a member of the Cabbage Patch and tap into its resources, you can apply for membership at cabbagepatch.org/become-a-member/.

HOW TO GIVE HELP: To learn more about how to donate goods, services or funds to the Cabbage Patch, visit cabbagepatch.org/how-you-can-help/give/.

mothers taking on jobs at home, children lacked structure, and the organization filled in where it could.

"Our men in the service, at home and in far away lands know that the Cabbage Patch stands as a friend at all times to their wives and children, and their mothers and fathers, in these trying times," reads a fundraising letter from 1942.

Marshall strived to fill whatever need she saw, and she saw quite a few of them in her 71-year history with the organization.

"There were a lot of huge, seismic things that were going on," Miller said of that time in history. "And they were just kind of continuing to serve in the midst of all that. ... (There is) just a depth, a desire and a willingness to do what it takes for our families and for our youth to be able to maximize and to be resilient."

How the Cabbage Patch continues to help at-risk children, families

Denis Stewart first came to the Cabbage Patch at age 3 as a daycare kid in 1961, and he's never really left.

Today, he works at the Patch part-time in the facilities department, but as a child and a teenager he was a proud member. His children and grandchildren followed in his footsteps and attended the Patch, too.

The organization already had a half-century long history in the neighborhood by the time Stewart started going there.

He grew up a half block from the settlement house, and has fond memories of learning to clown, playing sports, celebrating Thanksgiving with the soldiers at Fort Knox and becoming the Patch's first-ever youth leadership trainee. Patch alums from the late 20th century often talk about climbing to the top of a "Tarzan rope" and ringing a bell. Stewart only did it twice, and that was enough for him.

Somewhere amid all that fun, the Patch taught Stewart about respect, kindness and the benefit of helping your fellow neighbor. Back then, everyone chipped in to keep the place running.

He'd clean the backboards on the basketball court with vinegar and trim the hedges out front.

Marshall was in her early 70s by that point, and she still had a feistiness about her, he said. The economy had stabilized compared to the hardships around the World Wars or the Great Depression, but even so, she had a reputation for firmly haggling the price for whatever the settlement house needed. There was the price it sold for, and then there was *her* price. She always found a way to buy necessities for cheaper, and in turn, save resources to provide more for kids in the long run.

"Ms. Marshall was the tiniest lady, but she had a demeanor, and if she told you something, you better remember it," Stewart recalled.

Some people loved her and some people feared her, he continued. Either way, she always managed to figure out how to meet needs and get a job done.

It's a legacy that lives on more than four decades after her death, even if it manifests in different ways.

Miller is realistic about the Patch's limitations. While its small collection of vans and partnerships with schools allow it to serve those beyond walking distance, at its heart, the settlement house is still a neighborhood organization.

The Patch isn't going to eradicate poverty or end homelessness in Louisville. But it can support families and help them meet their immediate needs. The nonprofit can often fix a single problem that alleviates stress at home, and in turn, creates a more stable environment that can allow a child to thrive.

"It's just kind of cobbling together what's needed," Miller said. "So, we kind of help on the edges."

Marshall may have supported individual kids on their college journeys during her time, Miller said, but now the Patch has a dedicated program for college scholars. This year, it's supporting an unprecedented 43 students, who often need encouragement and guidance while navigating the academic world.

"When you're a first-generation college student, you might not know that when you're faced with a barrier, that it doesn't completely derail you," Miller explained. "You can make it past the test or you can find another option if you're told that the financial aid didn't come through or something along those lines."

There are Patch-wide programs that cover basics like school supplies and holiday gifts, and then there's a food and hygiene pantry for families facing an emergency.

In some cases, the organization can supplement a rent payment or an electric bill.

Sometimes parents have a criminal record that prevents them from finding housing or a job, so the Patch has partnered with a local attorney who assists with expungement.

"That alleviates the stress on the family," Miller said. "So that (a child) is in a better place where he can really maximize his potential. He can go in with a real clear perspective and be able to really experience and be a kid, instead of having to be weighed down by all the family concerns."

Ruffin, too, has used her own career as a mental health specialist to pay forward the experience her four kids have received at the Patch. She's taught wellness seminars to parents on social emotional learning. "It ain't just about the kids," Ruffin said. The Patch "is a whole family wellness group."

As a single mom, too, it's a blessing to know that, if she hits a snag in providing for her family that she has a resource that can guide her through overcoming it.

The Patch has been there for her since she was a child. All these years later, it's still committed to her well-being, both as a parent, and through the support, encouragement and life lessons that her teenage twins receive as members.

The foundation and grassroots support that Marshall built from scratch more than 115 years ago has certainly evolved, but it's still making a difference for Louisville children and families like the Ruffins everyday.

"That support is amazing, and it comes without judgment," Ruffin said. "It comes from understanding that as a single parent, we go through a lot. We sacrifice a lot, and sometimes we need help."

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A basketball game at the Cabbage Patch Settlement House on Nov. 6, 1949. ROBERT STEINAU/COURIER JOURNAL; FROM THE BARRY BINGHAM JR. COURIER JOURNAL PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

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