More than 1,000 people gathered on the White House’s South Lawn on a sunny, hot morning in July of 2022, waiting for President Joe Biden to emerge and commemorate the passage of landmark legislation—the first significant gun safety law in three decades.


Underpinning the moment were nearly three decades of quiet groundwork to cultivate a field of research, advocacy, funding, and data-driven policy in gun violence prevention, led in important ways by a Great Lakes-based philanthropy that this year will celebrate its 75th anniversary—the Joyce Foundation.

In the early 1990s, Joyce embarked on a solitary effort to confront the nation’s gun violence as the trauma and bloodshed reached historic levels. Its core strategy was funding research into the real causes of the violence, and potential solutions, an initiative that clashed with political muscle that had frozen the federal government’s research efforts, ignited the pro-gun contingent’s ongoing wrath, and even led to threats of physical harm.

Nevertheless, Joyce persevered, and 30 years later, the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act signed by Biden included specific policy reforms informed by Joyce-funded research. The new law fell short of all the known measures needed to solve the nation’s gun violence crisis. But for the first time, science and data were available to justify at least modest steps forward.

“For decades, we placed our bet on the belief that over the long term, research and evidence would matter in this debate, and that the research could be used to develop new policy ideas, fuel successful advocacy efforts, and inform how policy makers could and should act,” said Ellen Alberding, president of the Joyce Foundation. “The event was the ultimate validation of those beliefs, and that the work we are doing will save lives.”

Also at the White House that day were frontline advocates for the growing field of community-led violence prevention. It included a number of Joyce partners whom the Foundation came to support as its approach to the nation’s guns crisis expanded.
And this wasn’t the first or last time Joyce’s impact on policy was recognized. A month later, its 50-year leadership on environmental issues, from Great Lakes restoration to climate solutions, earned the Foundation an invitation to a similar ceremony, when Biden signed a $430 billion bill considered the largest U.S. response to climate change in history.

Each of those moments punctuated the patient strategy behind Joyce’s long-haul, policy-focused philanthropic investments.

THREE QUARTERS OF A CENTURY

As Joyce marks its 75th year in 2023, it is taking stock of its accomplishments, occasional setbacks, and ongoing challenges. The Foundation hopes to highlight lessons learned along its three-quarters-of-a-century journey -- from a timber heiress’ first charitable giving in post-World War II America, to the role Joyce now plays as a $1 billion philanthropy focused on advancing racial equity and economic mobility for the Great Lakes’ next generations.

More than two dozen interviews with philanthropy leaders, current and former Foundation leaders, program officers, grantees, and other partners illustrated Joyce’s distinct philosophy of work, shaped by decades of grant making on some of society’s most intractable problems. Among the key takeaways:

- **Play the long game.** The most impact will come from smart policy change, but progress takes time and a commitment to weathering political and social winds.
- **Data is undeniable.** Comprehensive research and evaluation build the evidence base to support policy change.
- **Taking risk is essential.** The work is too important – and the stakes too high – to play it safe.

Those lessons are embodied in each of Joyce’s evolving program areas – Culture, Democracy, Education & Economic Mobility, Environment, Gun Violence Prevention & Justice Reform, and Journalism. And facets of the Foundation’s approach surface in every one of them.

- **Peering around the corner:** Joyce strives to anticipate and address larger, at times unforeseen, challenges. One example is its adoption of racial equity and economic mobility as an overarching strategy. While equity was woven into virtually all of Joyce’s efforts over the decades, it became a much more explicit objective in 2018—two years before the galvanizing murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers. Joyce President Ellen Alberding had asked staff and board to reflect on and articulate a cohesive purpose for the Foundation’s programs. A data-rich study by the Urban Institute, commissioned by the Foundation, painted a portrait of the Great Lakes in 2040 as home to a diversifying yet aging population in need of ways to nurture and hold on to younger generations.

- **Research laying the groundwork for policy:** Joyce’s Gun Violence Prevention & Justice Reform program has invested more than $33 million in research support, resulting in hundreds of publications of seminal findings on gun violence. Joyce also was instrumental in creating several advocacy organizations that have become central to current policy debates, including the Fund for a Safer Future, Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, and Mayors Against Illegal Guns. And it provided crucial startup funding for a comprehensive national database on violent deaths that is fueling research and policy change across the region.
• **Innovation:** The one-of-a-kind Joyce Awards for artists and arts organizations in the Great Lakes region is but one example of the Foundation’s innovation. The result has been stronger mid-size and small arts organizations based in communities of color, new partnerships between legacy institutions and arts groups by and for people of color, and a push to prioritize diversity at all cultural institutions, while bringing many little-known artists to national prominence. Read more about the Joyce Awards and Joyce’s Culture program here.

• **Going the distance:** For decades, Joyce has pushed for education reforms to improve prospects for the region’s children, following the data on the best approaches and helping to translate federal policy into advances at the state, local and district school level. It has emphasized educator effectiveness and added economic mobility initiatives after recognizing the growing connection between a good education, a post-secondary credential, and good jobs. Along the way, it helped establish several influential education organizations, including the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research and Advance Illinois.

• **Building coalitions:** On the environment, Joyce helped build a broad-based network of funders, advocates, and government officials to create conditions for a string of landmark protections for the Great Lakes, and more recent advances in clean energy transition. It helped create several organizations to work on protecting the Great Lakes, building the framework for national water protection policy and the clean-up of dozens of degraded sites across the Great Lakes basin.

Likewise, with its many partners, Joyce’s Democracy program has contributed to nonpartisan regional efforts to remove barriers to voting and fair representation, establish accurate counts for the decennial census, and improve the process by which voting district maps are drawn. Most recently, it partnered with Joyce’s gun violence-prevention staff in an effort to convene experts and advocates to explore how to combat violent threats to democracy.

Julia Stasch, former president of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, which is also based in Chicago, said Joyce stands out for its effective work at the local and regional level while having “multi-tier impact” on the national level and “punching way above its weight in the policy area.”

“One of the things that I appreciate about Joyce is that it is both ambitious and aggressive but humble, too,” she said. “Joyce isn’t interested in taking credit. They weren’t out front on something like gun violence policy as part of an ego-driven position. They were out front because no one else would join them. In all their focus areas, they’re looking for a critical mass of voice and influence and resources to actually change the landscape.”

Said Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation and a partner with Joyce on cultural initiatives: “The most important Joyce lesson, I believe, is standing for the idea that change requires long-term investment and not being intoxicated by the newest, shiniest object. Foundations like Joyce that stick to their knitting—which is the fundamental work of justice in America—are beacons. They offer an alternative to the sometimes fickle, three-year-grant-cycle oriented philanthropy.”

**MIDWEST ORIGINS**

The Joyce mission starts with a family journey, set in motion by a Connecticut blacksmith turned manufacturer and mill owner who in 1855 sent his ambitious, 30-year-old son west on a rail car.
The young man, David Joyce, carried $6,000, looking for the family business’ next opportunity – and he found it in eastern Iowa. There, he built a massive, family-owned industry, based primarily in Midwest lumber and other enterprises.

The Joyce Foundation places its founding with his granddaughter and only heir, Beatrice Joyce Keane, who started her philanthropy by writing a check for $1,000 to a Chicago community fund in 1948. Learn more about Joyce’s history from this timeline.

With Beatrice Joyce Keane’s passing in 1972, the philanthropic effort she’d begun started coalescing into something more concrete. When all the corporate assets were shifted to a formal organization in 1976, the Joyce Foundation had $140 million in assets – at the time, the largest foundation in Illinois. Its charter provided a broad mandate that has allowed Foundation leaders to evolve its mission to address the most critical issues of the day.

In its early years, Joyce was largely insular and less strategic. But by 1978 – led by the late John “Jack” Anderson, its new chairman, and Charles U. Daly, a former Kennedy administration official Anderson hired to be Foundation president – Joyce transformed almost overnight into a distinctive organization with a diligent outward- and forward-focused culture that shook up the conventional model of philanthropy.

FOCUS ON POLICY

Its new focus – leveraging policy as a powerful tool for enduring change – became a signature strategy that few foundations were pursuing, at least at the time. The rationale was a belief that policy change was the key to making not only significant but enduring impact.

“Joyce knows that the biggest bang for its buck is leveraging public-sector dollars, energy, and policies toward the solutions that evidence shows matter most,” said Gretchen Crosby Sims, a former Joyce vice president and strategy director who now works in the private sector. “And I just love the fact that Joyce knows itself. It’s had this commitment to a very smart, differentiated approach to grant making forever.”

To guide its strategy, Joyce developed a method of mapping a continuum of policy development that highlighted the best opportunities for investments. It starts with research and analysis of an issue, then continues through policy development, public education, advocacy, constituency building, and evaluating effectiveness – all on a nonpartisan basis, and all steering clear of lobbying.

Alberding credits the late Larry Hansen, another former Joyce vice president, with placing the strategy continuum on paper.

“We were already doing these things, but Larry articulated and bucketed all of them in such a way that helped us understand how they each fit together and reinforce each other,” she said. “It helped our staff and grantees understand how their individual actions fit into a bigger strategy.”

INSIDE, OUTSIDE

Another distinct component of the strategy is finding partners both inside and outside of government to focus on solving issues together – what former MacArthur President Julia Stasch calls Joyce’s “exquisite sense of the interactive power and interplay of an inside-outside strategy.”
An early proponent of this was Paula Wolff, a former board member who had been director of policy and planning under Illinois Gov. James Thompson before joining the Foundation. What it meant, Wolff said, was that Joyce could work as “an external agitator” but also at times as “an internal partner with government.” She said it also helped prepare advocates and other partners to serve in government when necessary and “if the time was right.”

Among many examples were efforts at workforce development, such as the Shifting Gears program (2006-2011) that worked with six Great Lakes states to improve adult basic education and community and technical colleges. More recent efforts include convening education stakeholders in 2023 to share research and build momentum on addressing teacher shortages across Great Lakes states; working with the Illinois Attorney General’s office to expand a state-of-the-art gun tracking platform, and working with the Police Foundation and Major Cities Chiefs Association on evidence-based research to reduce violent crime.

“We’re willing to work with anybody who is honorable and willing to partner with us to get at these seemingly intractable problems,” said Jose Alvarez, the current Joyce board chairman. “There isn’t a sense here that somebody has a monopoly on good ideas. Joyce has been able to find ways of pulling people together who appear to be really strange bedfellows. If you think about how complicated the world is right now, that’s not an easy thing to do.”

TAKING RISKS

Joyce has endured its share of setbacks over 75 years. Its attempt to help reform election campaign finance, including research and education that laid the foundation for the bipartisan McCain-Feingold Act, was undone by the Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision. Some of its education reform accomplishments have been rolled back. Early efforts to help reform agricultural policy came up short and were discontinued.

Most stark, the persistence of the American gun violence epidemic, day-to-day in the nation’s cities and far too often in mass shootings and suicides across the country, often make it hard to see progress on one of the Foundation’s signature issues.

But Joyce has evolved and pivoted its strategies and goals, learning and adapting along the way, and it continues to do so. It recognizes that policy change is arduous, complicated, and unpredictable, and that investing in it takes a considerable tolerance and comfort with risk.

Alberding believes that sometimes it’s important to fail along the way.

“If I unpack the risk of failure, yes, I don’t want to be on the horse with the lance, tilting at windmills,” she said. “But I do want the Foundation to take advantage of the very long time horizon that we have. We can focus on things for 10 or 20 years if that’s what it’s going to take.

“I want our staff to know we support them exploring new ideas, investing in new people taking chances on things, even if there is a risk of failure,” Alberding continued. “If you do take big chances, which is what we want to do, there are going to be some flops along with big successes.”

Alberding said the Joyce board has been fully supportive of the risk taking along the way, and indeed, it was a reason some were attracted to working there.
“There clearly was a need for an organization that was a risk taker,” said Carlton Guthrie, a business entrepreneur who served on the board for more than 30 years until 2022. “Joyce would move into areas where policy had not yet formed, emerging areas that were on a few folks’ radar but weren’t getting the attention and light they needed. Joyce would grab those issues and run with them. That was extremely attractive to me.”

LONG TERM

Along the way, Joyce’s strategy has shifted to reinforce the long-term approach. During her tenure, Alberding lengthened program strategies to five years from three, to give grantees more time to succeed and “to match the length of our commitments to the ambition of the goals.”

At the same time, Joyce has tried to be honest and sensitive in its partnerships with grantees. “If something isn’t going to go forward with a prospective grantee, let them know,” said Craig Kennedy, the Foundation’s president from 1986 to 1992. “Be very direct with them.”

For Joyce grantees, the risk tolerance, resilience, and willingness to stick with an idea can be empowering.

One who has worked on both sides of the relationship is Sameer Gadkaree, president of the Institute for College Access & Success, a higher education advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C. He’s also a former education grant maker at the Foundation.

“There are many foundations that are very focused on short term results,” Gadkaree said. “Joyce does such a good job of assuring grantees—and gives confidence to folks like me—that there’ll be at least some folks who will come along for a long-term journey, if it’s the right thing to do.”

CULTURE PROGRAM

RE-DEFINING CULTURE: PIVOTING TO THE JOYCE AWARDS

By the late 1980s, the Joyce Foundation’s support for arts and culture in Chicago and the Great Lakes wasn’t floundering, but board members felt it lacked the strategic, potent impact that was fundamental to the Foundation’s mission.

Over time, the Culture program’s portion of the grant budget had declined. While funding the Art Institute of Chicago and other major institutions, the Foundation was moving away from culture and making a greater commitment to public policy initiatives, where fewer foundations were working.

Staff recommended scrapping the program altogether. The board resisted. A different approach emerged: What if Joyce shifted gears and raised up the voices of artists and arts organizations that weren’t being heard, not just the established institutions it had been supporting?

“We decided, rather than getting out of the cultural field altogether, that we could define culture in a different way,” said former board member Paula Wolff.

In 1992, Joyce announced a new, more comprehensive approach that would acknowledge the arts as critical anchors in the health and well-being of their communities. The Foundation would begin supporting small and mid-sized arts organizations based in communities of color, connect mainstream
institutions to new audiences and new partnerships through artists and arts organizations of color, and encourage “institutional commitment to diversity at all levels of planning and implementation.”

The arts, the new grant guidelines stated, “represent an untapped resource for helping people deal with the challenges facing us as a community.”

RAISING ARTISTS’ PROFILES

That shift ultimately led to the second seminal moment in the story of Joyce’s Culture program: The creation of the Joyce Awards, a unique and coveted recognition that pairs artists of color and arts organizations throughout the Great Lakes region every year in producing new works, often raising their profile to a national level and deepening connections with diverse communities.

Established in 2004, the awards had three primary objectives: enabling Great Lakes-area cultural institutions to commission new work by artists of color, catalyzing the creative practices of pioneering artists of color working across disciplines and genres, and fostering collaboration with communities who participate directly in the creative process to uplift underrepresented voices and to create more culturally vibrant and equitable communities. The projects, now funded at $100,000 apiece -- including a stipend of at least $30,000 for the artist -- demonstrate the capacity of the arts to inspire and mobilize social change, and celebrate the ambitious visions of artists and organizations committed to creating new work that represents and engages diverse communities.

It was one of the earliest recognitions of its kind—a sizable financial investment in artists that changed how other foundations thought about and behaved toward arts and culture.

“I think what makes Joyce’s Culture program unique is its long history of building trust and relationships with those on the ground who are thinking deeply about the intersectionality of issues that impact communities of color,” said Angelique Power, president and CEO of the Skillman Foundation, and a former Culture program director at Joyce.

“Much of that work happens in the Culture program through the types of grants that are made and the types of work being done by grantees.”

EMPOWERING THE SECTOR

In the beginning, Joyce’s Culture program might have been considered just a legacy interest, dating back to founder Beatrice Joyce Kean writing checks in the 1970s to the Art Institute, Lyric Opera, Field Museum, and other major Chicago cultural institutions.

Lesser-known grantees included the Kuumba Workshop and Rainbow Television Workshop, and the Foundation had been a crucial player in supporting an explosion of fledgling Chicago arts groups, including Pegasus Players, Hubbard Street Dance, and Steppenwolf Theatre, all now established entities.

But the new approaches allowed the Foundation to deepen its cultural impact in underrepresented communities, and help empower the sector.

Michelle T. Boone, Joyce’s culture program director from 2004 to 2011 and now president of The Poetry Foundation in Chicago, said the Foundation’s steady funding allowed smaller organizations to have paid staff, which gave those organizations the resources and credibility to seek other funding.
“The investments Joyce made on an ongoing basis positioned groups to be able to leverage Joyce support with new funders,” Boone said.

TAKING CHANCES

The Foundation’s strategy in culture also aligned with Joyce’s history of taking chances. One example that stayed with Boone was when Joyce gave a grant to the National Cambodian Heritage Museum & Killing Fields Memorial in Chicago.

“So, yeah, there are a ton of risks that you take,” she said, “but Joyce isn’t necessarily a place about safe bets.”

She said Joyce also advocated for the appointment of people of color on boards and hired in senior positions in arts organizations. “It signaled to the field that this level of inclusion was important and was a part of the funding consideration,” Boone said.

Power noted that Joyce was one of the few philanthropies that early on focused on diversity and inclusion in the arts. “That was followed by several other (organizations),” she said, “and Michelle took it to another level in part because she was constantly in community-forming relationships and brought a stable of really important BIPOC cultural organizations to the portfolio.”

People running those organizations went on to important things. Luna Negra’s Eduardo Vilaro became artistic director and CEO of New York’s Ballet Hispanico. Onyx co-founder Ron OJ Parson was a resident artist at Court Theatre and directed plays in Pasadena, California, and Stratford, Ontario.

Over the years, Joyce has tweaked the Culture program—supporting arts workforce and leadership diversity in 2005 and, in 2018, reaffirming its commitment to emphasize the next generation of art creators, leaders and audiences, and to “ensure that underserved communities have access to the arts.”

But the core intent has remained clear. As of 2023, the Joyce Awards competition has awarded more than $4 million to commission 82 new works and collaborations between artists and leading arts, cultural, and community-based organizations.

RIPPLE EFFECT

Beyond the numbers, the Joyce Awards have created a ripple effect. Winners went on to greater prominence in the arts after their recognition from Joyce. Examples include:

- Grammy Awards: Carolina Chocolate Drops and Terence Blanchard are among five Joyce winners who have won.
- Pulitzer Prize for Drama: Lynn Nottage and Quiara Alegria Hudes.
- MacArthur Foundation “Genius” Fellowships: Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Larissa FastHorse, Emmanuel Pratt, and Tarell Alvin McCraney.
- Bessie Awards: Bill T. Jones, Nick Cave, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, and Camille A. Brown.
- United States Artists Fellowships: 15 Joyce Awards winners
Joyce Foundation President Ellen Alberding, a former Culture program director whom many credit for the strategy shifts, in turn credits her successors for the Joyce Awards’ success.

“We had a couple people running it over time, after I was no longer directly involved, who just picked some really, really hot up-and-comers, who subsequently became geniuses,” she said. “That was a real credit to the folks who were running the Joyce Awards, that it became so good.”

Under current program director Mia Khimm, the Joyce Awards were expanded to $100,000, the largest since the initiative was created. And today, current Joyce board members, staff and alums view it and the Foundation’s wider pivot as quintessential examples of the Foundation’s capacity to shift approaches in strategy — even one that traces its origins to the Foundation’s namesake.

At least one board member thinks the Foundation should have made the pivot earlier.

“You’ve got to figure out what lane you can take to exert leverage,” Board Member Tracey Meares said, “and I think we finally put all the pieces together.”

**DEMOCRACY PROGRAM**

**DEMOCRACY AMID A PANDEMIC AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE**

In the months after COVID-19 shutdowns began, and leading up to the 2020 election, grantees from the Joyce Foundation’s Democracy program kept bumping into grantees from the Foundation’s gun violence prevention program.

The reason: Armed extremists were threatening to disrupt government and the 2020 elections process.

“We saw these militia groups swarming our statehouses,” said Carrie Davis, who directs Joyce’s democracy work. “They were in Lansing, Michigan; Columbus, Ohio; Springfield, Illinois. In cities and towns across the Great Lakes region, extremist groups were protesting governors and mayors and public health officials over COVID restrictions, and we were hearing about threats to election officials and public health officials in red, blue and purple areas across all of our states.”

That unsettling dynamic led Davis to meet throughout the summer and fall of 2020 with Tim Daly, who directs Joyce’s gun violence prevention work. Daly, a former Capitol Hill staffer and gun policy advocate, said the concern “became a kind of existential issue” for Joyce, underscored by the January 6 riot at the Capitol a few months later.

The result was a unique and innovative pilot project leveraging the Foundation’s expertise in both democracy and gun violence prevention with a new set of partners, focused on how to reduce political violence throughout the Great Lakes region by getting ahead of it.

“These armed extremists were starting to become a barrier to the effective delivery of government and to ordinary people’s ability to participate civically—whether that’s to vote or protest or testify at your state capital,” Daly said. “If the policy process could no longer be responsive to evidence, and to the will of the people because of these armed, politically active extremists, then what are we doing?”

The shift in tactics – confronting emerging issues, leveraging collaboration, and breaking through silos -- has been a particular hallmark of Joyce’s democracy initiatives since the Foundation began working
informally in the area in 1982—first focused on voter registration and education, and good government issues, even supporting citizen watchdog groups.

Today, Joyce’s Democracy program is focused on assuring participation and representation of all people who call the Great Lakes home. That includes investing in policies to protect and strengthen voting rights and elections, fair representation, and strengthening the decennial census process. But the program has pivoted several times along the way to more specific, timely issues.

Even so, Davis said, the Foundation has tried to stay in the game and be a reliable partner to democracy proponents no matter the issues every four years, or every ten.

“What you see a lot around elections is a boom and bust cycle, where national funders care about battleground states and battleground election years, but the rest of the time a lot of funders don’t,” Davis said. “That cycle is toxic for effective engagement, long-term reform, and power-building because the money is constantly coming in and leaving. One of the things that we endeavor to do is help showcase the value of long-term investments in states.”

MONEY AND POLITICS

From the early 1980s, Joyce’s Democracy program evolved to work on the role of media in elections and campaign finance. Later, it shifted to support work on the reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act in 1993.

In 1997, the focus turned to “Money and Politics,” and became a more formal effort of research and empowerment, including funding a new NPR reporting beat on money and politics. The new program was influential in the drive to pass the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, known as the McCain-Feingold Act, which restricted soft money in campaigns and blocked corporations and unions from engaging in issue advocacy and advertising.

The new law was a major step toward curtailing the insidious influence of money in politics. But it was substantially gutted in 2010 by the U.S. Supreme Court in its Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission ruling, a decision that overturned the ban on corporate and union political advertising.

The defeat was a setback for a significant Joyce investment, but not a deterrent to confronting difficult challenges.

“Are there things I would have done differently? Probably not,” recalled former Joyce President Deborah Leff, who initiated the Foundation’s campaign finance reform work. “I think it’s unpredictable what will happen, and I think making people aware of the pervasive influence of money in politics is really important, and that was accomplished.”

BETTER VOTING MAPS

More recently, Joyce has helped achieve noteworthy victories in its long-running effort to make legislative and Congressional district maps more representative. Michigan and Ohio are two examples.

For decades, the maps that decide whom citizens vote for, and who represents them in Congress and legislatures, have been drawn in most places by elected officials from the dominant political party—often leading to partisan gerrymandering favoring that party’s candidates. This, in effect, allows elected officials to choose their voters rather than the other way around.
Joyce supported close to a decade of litigation challenging Wisconsin’s gerrymandered maps, which went up to the US Supreme Court twice. The Court ultimately ruled in June 2019 that partisan gerrymandering claims present political questions beyond the reach of the federal courts, leaving the issue to be fought out in the states. While a significant loss, the years of litigation in Wisconsin and other states has helped shift the public narrative on the issue.

For years, Joyce has invested in making the case for policy reform to stop partisan gerrymandering, which has started to pay off. In 2018, a long list of advocacy groups helped change the process in Michigan, where voters approved a ballot measure establishing an independent commission to draw the maps. With Joyce backing, those groups then supported implementation of the new public process, which resulted in more public input and district maps that better aligned with the make-up of the state. In Ohio, voters approved a similar ballot issue to ban partisan gerrymandering and make the process more bipartisan, although it is still highly politicized and the reforms have not yet been fully implemented.

Driving change in both states was more than two decades of work by funders like Joyce and their many partners on the ground.

“We’ve supported a ton of research over the years into redistricting, its impacts, and effective tools to counter gerrymandering,” Davis said. “We’ve supported public education and communications, policy advocacy, litigation and even research into developing methods to measure the severity of partisan gerrymandering for use in advocacy and court cases.”

CENSUS, COVID, AND COUNTING VOTES

Joyce has been a fervent supporter of thorough, accurate decennial census counts for decades. Those efforts, including nearly $1 million in support in 2010 and $1.6 million a decade later, emphasized boosting participation in historically undercounted areas—communities of color, low-income neighborhoods, immigrant populations, renters, and young children—largely by collaborating with community nonprofits viewed as trusted information sources as part of the “Count Me In” campaign.

In 2010, all the Great Lakes states met or exceeded their 2000 participation rates. Chicago’s gain since 2000 was the second biggest among the 25 largest cities. In 2020, despite the COVID pandemic, challenges from the Trump administration, and widespread misinformation, Illinois’ self-response rate was higher than in 2010 and the seventh highest nationally.

With COVID and misinformation also posing serious challenges in the 2020 elections, Joyce leaned in and increased funding to support work by election groups and state and local election officials to adapt election systems. That included putting in place safe voting plans, recruiting a new generation of poll workers, and public education so voters would know what new voting options might be available to them during the pandemic. It also included support to state and national voting rights groups to ramp up election protection, monitor for disinformation and potential violence, and prepare for the post-election period with proactive communication plans like “Count Every Vote,” to give election officials time to count the higher than usual number of mail ballots.

Joyce worked pre-emptively with a number of partners across the region during the 2020 and 2022 elections to make sure voting was free, fair, accessible, and safe:
• Grantees Protect Democracy Project and the Brennan Center for Justice focused on addressing legal issues.

• State-based voting rights groups -- including Common Cause, State Voices, All Voting is Local, Promote the Vote Michigan, the Ohio Voter Rights Coalition, and the Wisconsin Voting Rights Coalition -- coordinated nonpartisan voter education and protection.

• The Students Learn Students Vote Coalition and Campus Vote Project worked with higher education institutions to provide nonpartisan voter information to students who might be voting for the first time.

• Other groups focused on improving election administration practices, including the Center for Election Innovation and Research and the Center for Tech and Civic Life.

Joyce Foundation Board Chairman Jose Alvarez said he views the entire Democracy program as one of Joyce’s greatest successes. “It’s incredibly important to the functioning of our society,” he said. “It has had enormous effect and will continue to have enormous impact. This is another great example of the importance of patient capital.”

HEADING OFF VIOLENCE

While the 2020 census and elections work was winding down, in 2021 the political violence project was gaining momentum.

Not certain where the country’s polarized politics were headed, Joyce nevertheless tried to get out ahead of what it perceived as an emerging crisis. It convened funders, experts, and activists, to assess what happened during the 2020 election, explore what worked to prevent violence and fear, what didn’t, and what future tools would be needed.

It funded focus groups and public opinion research on how people perceived political violence, and on how to speak with people about the risk without chilling public participation. It sought to test the appetite for policies that might restrict guns at polling stations and public buildings, or create accountability for threats against election workers.

The Foundation also funded work to convene a variety of stakeholders to share learning and develop solutions, including a partnership between the Anti-Defamation League and National Urban League, meant to bring together a cross-section of civic groups from different sectors to share strategies to fight political violence; a grant to the Association of Prosecuting Attorneys which convened prosecutors from across the political spectrum to discuss their role in preventing and addressing armed extremist activity and developed guidance for prosecutors; and a grant to 21 CP Solutions to develop guidance for law enforcement on how to prevent political violence.

So far, Davis said, it’s been reassuring that political violence has failed to slow voter participation the way many feared it would, but there are lingering concerns about the impact on election workers, many of whom are leaving the profession.

“The public wants the government to do something about this,” Davis said. “This is a scary topic and nobody likes to think about it, but we’ve got to figure it out. It’s heartening that states are beginning to
enact policies to address the risks posed by political violence, but there is more work to do to build effective solutions.”

In many respects, that has been a hallmark of the Foundation’s democracy work since the early 1980s, not being afraid to tackle the hard issues and investing in developing long-term solutions.

**EDUCATION & ECONOMIC MOBILITY PROGRAM**

**DECADES IN THE CLASSROOM: FOLLOWING THE EVIDENCE**

Follow the evidence. Be nimble and opportunistic where the evidence shows promise.

Those are the hallmarks of the Joyce Foundation’s thought leadership and grant making in education and economic mobility over the decades. Focused on improving prospects for children of color and from marginalized communities, Joyce has stayed the course on one of the nation’s most persistent challenges, helping to build broad coalitions and lay the necessary groundwork for policy reforms.

Among its primary aspirations: Helping shape federal policy, while also leveraging it to spur reforms at the state and district level, and pressing on the established fact that every student benefits from having the best teachers and principals.

The winding path has produced its share of successes, such as helping promote the inclusion of student achievement in teacher evaluations. It also led to disappointments, such as later rollbacks of those same rules. But the Foundation has always pushed ahead, building a network of partnerships and laying the groundwork for future success.

“I give Joyce a lot of credit,” said Robin Steans, president of Advance Illinois, a bipartisan education policy and advocacy group that has worked closely with Joyce over the years. “They were way ahead of the curve on statewide education policy, and they not only led the way, but have really pulled a lot of people along with them and done so consistently over many years. I hope they continue to stay the course!”

Joyce’s focus on children, education, and providing a better future for the next generation in the Great Lakes has its roots in founder Beatrice Joyce Kean’s interest in the children of employees of her family’s lumber enterprise. Before she died in the 1970s, she had paid for them to attend college.

By the mid-1980s, Joyce had formally committed to a full grant making program focused on policy, research, and reform in education. The approach manifested itself in investments in Chicago school reform and briefly in early childhood education, before evolving into its current focus on effective educators, smooth pathways from high school into college and careers, and post-secondary success.

After the COVID-19 pandemic shut down schools in 2020, Joyce expanded its scope again to help students recover from a devastating loss of learning that may have set back a generation of students.

“When the evidence points to a new tactic or a promising strand of work, we go there if it makes sense,” said Stephanie Banchero, director of Joyce’s Education and Economic Mobility program. But “we always keep our eyes on the long game.”

**LEARNING AND ADAPTING**
Over the years, Joyce’s education program has been laser-focused on assuring that local schools benefit from federal policy. Some of the most impactful policies in education in the last 30 years have emanated from the federal government, starting with the Clinton administration’s focus on education standards, the Bush administration’s “No Child Left Behind” policies, the Obama administration’s “Race to the Top,” and more recently the “Every Student Succeeds Act.”

Those policies ushered in a focus on closing achievement gaps, effective educators, high academic standards, school accountability, charter schools, turning around low-performing schools, and innovation. In some cases, Joyce research led the way. In others, it followed where the research went. Joyce also supported policy development, advocacy, and implementation to drive these policies.

Best known for its work on quality teaching, Joyce helped fund a seminal study, *The Widget Effect*, which showed teachers were not interchangeable. Good teaching mattered, and it was important to understand which teachers were effective and which were not. With Joyce funding, grantee Education Trust showed that underserved schools were getting the least prepared and least effective teachers.

Research drove Joyce to focus on the entire teacher continuum. It has supported groups working to improve policy on teacher mentoring and induction, evaluation, dismissal and tenure, professional development, pay, diversity, and equitable distribution of talented teachers. Its grantees promoted teacher voice in policy reform and building career ladders to help teachers advance professionally. In 2023, it launched the Great Lakes Teacher Shortage Community of Practice to help five states use data to build smart policies to tackle growing shortfalls.

Gretchen Crosby Sims, a former Joyce vice president of strategy who now works in the private sector, said the data showed very clearly and consistently that teacher quality was the place to focus. She said Joyce was working on “six or seven different levers” on policy all at once, including the idea that effective teachers should earn more. Another, more controversial element was including student learning growth in teacher evaluations.

By 2010, most states had changed their laws governing teacher evaluations to include student test scores in some way. Since then, policymakers in many states rolled back test-score-based teacher evaluations due to poor implementation and the growing backlash against standardized tests.

“That was the real battle,” Crosby Sims said. “I do think that the states and districts have back-slid on that.”

Joyce has stuck with teacher policy and added school leadership as a key component of its strategy, as research continues to show they are the main in-school drivers of student success.

As with Joyce’s other issue programs, learning and adapting has been critical in the Foundation’s approach to education, said Margot Rogers, an education expert who is vice president of the Foundation’s board of directors and vice president for strategic initiatives at the University of Virginia.

“I think that we have a team that’s willing to squint and listen,” Rogers said. “I often describe it as squinting with your ears, like listening really carefully for opportunities.”

Few foundations focus on fully understanding how research and policy can function together, Rogers said. The key, she added, “is understanding various approaches and the second- and third-order
implications of those approaches, and then figuring out how to get to a better policy set. That is hard. And it’s exactly right headed.”

**BEYOND HIGH SCHOOL**

That approach led Joyce to an entirely new avenue of grant-making: post-secondary success.

As the efforts in K-12 education progressed, evidence mounted that, even as high school graduation rates increased and achievement gaps narrowed, it was not enough. In an emerging economy and a workforce more dependent on technology, young people needed advanced skills. To land a good-paying job, they needed a post-secondary credential.

“It was clear that even if everything we were doing in the K-12 education space was perfect, it wouldn’t necessarily lead to economic mobility,” Banchero said. “All the research showed that young people need post-secondary credentials to be successful in the workplace. That’s when we said, ‘We’ve got to do some different kinds of work, not just focus on K-12.’”

That led to creation of the “Joint Fund,” a pilot portfolio that sought to find connections between the Education program and Joyce’s Employment program. Eventually, the programs merged into the current Education and Economic Mobility program, with two added portfolios: College and Career Readiness, and Post-Secondary Success.

The College and Career Readiness portfolio aims to improve alignment between K-12, higher education, and workforce systems, and close gaps in access to rigorous coursework and high-quality career exploration opportunities.

In 2016, Joyce launched the Great Lakes College and Career Pathways Partnership, a $3 million initiative to help four Great Lakes communities equip young people to thrive in college and careers. More recently, it worked with other funders to help launch the Chicago Roadmap, a partnership between Chicago Public Schools and City Colleges of Chicago that aims to help CPS graduates enter the community college ready to succeed.

Joyce moved into post-secondary when it became clear the space was right for policy reform. Despite progress, young people of color and those from low-income backgrounds are still less likely to earn an affordable post-secondary credential that leads to a good job. The Foundation’s work focuses on improving community college outcomes, expanding access to high-quality public colleges, and better representation at select public universities.

Joyce has funded research to detail the inequities, helped build a stable of civil-rights advocates, funded policy development, deepened its support of state-level advocates, and more recently, worked to stave off a backlash against higher education. Joyce also is playing a major role in community colleges awarding baccalaureate degrees.

“At the federal level, (Joyce’s) work continues to try to achieve a lasting, more equitable, more affordable higher education system, and to tackle the long-standing racial inequities that have been baked into the higher ed system for decades,” said Sameer Gadkaree, president of the Institute for College Access & Success, a Joyce grantee, and a former Joyce program officer.
Over the years, no matter what the issue, central to all of Joyce’s efforts was building broad coalitions of civil rights groups, business, and federal, state, and local policy advocates.

CLOSE TO HOME

From its Chicago base, Joyce has long tried to include lessons learned at home in national policy conversations and bring national lessons home.

At the state level, the Foundation and others worked through the Illinois Early Learning Council and in 2006 Illinois became the first state to offer voluntary, high-quality preschool to all three- and four-year-olds. Joyce helped launch Advance Illinois and, more recently, the Illinois Workforce Education Research Collaborative, which conducts research on education initiatives that span early childhood through post-secondary.

In Chicago, soon after city schools were labelled “worst in the nation,” in 1987 Joyce became involved in efforts to grant power to locally elected school councils. Among other contributions, Joyce helped found the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, which partnered with Chicago Public Schools to study the impact of reform measures, and Catalyst Chicago, a magazine that reported on school improvement. Later, Joyce helped bring another K-12-focused media outlet, Chalkbeat Chicago, to the city, when policy-focused reporting waned because of the media’s financial troubles.

While Chicago’s school reform results have been mixed, a seminal study published in 2017 showed that CPS students were improving faster than 96 percent of districts in the country. Joyce followed up early the next year by supporting a research report analyzing why. It pointed to teacher quality as a key driver.

Joyce’s deep investments in Teach Chicago, an initiative to attract and retain highly qualified, diverse teachers for hard-to-staff city schools and the Chicago Roadmap highlight the Foundation’s dedication to helping young people in Chicago succeed, especially those furthest from opportunity.

Darren Reisberg, president of Hartwick College in New York, was Joyce’s executive vice president from 2019 to 2022 while serving as chairman of the Illinois State Board of Education. He said the key to success for philanthropy in the education sphere—having done the groundwork when policy opportunities arise—is important in the broader mission of philanthropy.

“You just have to realize that often times all the work that we do will sometimes lead to tiny steps. But they're steps in the right direction that create the type of momentum that's necessary to take the bigger steps,” Reisberg said.

“What we have come to learn is that you're going to see the tides turn, and you have to be really careful about getting so discouraged that you just pull out your funding, as opposed to at least keeping a base amount of grantee efforts in the area to be prepared for when the next opportunity comes. That's the case around all of our areas of work: it's important to still figure out the right way to engage even amidst elements of defeat, because opportunities likely will rise again, depending on the social, economic, and political winds.”

ENVIRONMENT PROGRAM

PARTNERING IN GREAT LAKES PROTECTIONS
When the largest federal infrastructure spending bill since the Eisenhower years emerged from Congress in 2021, tucked inside was the culmination of patient, decades-long collaboration and determination. No small part of it sprung from the Chicago offices of the Joyce Foundation.

The bill included $1 billion for restoring the Great Lakes, the source of a fifth of the world’s fresh water. The cash would open the door to completing clean-up of 22 former industrial sites around the lakes system – from the St. Lawrence River in New York to Lake Superior at the Minnesota-Wisconsin line – with the aim of removing threats to public health and restoring the health of these critical natural systems.

That such a measure was a priority is testament to decades of collective work by a raft of environmental advocates, researchers, elected officials, and philanthropic foundations, stressing the importance of the lakes to the region’s health, economy, and identity.

Joyce has been among many leaders of that movement to protect the Great Lakes, credited for its long view, supporting strategic advocacy over time, and helping build a network of regional lakes-focused organizations along the way.

More recently, Joyce joined others in expanding its approach to focus on assuring equitable and affordable access to drinking water throughout the region, especially in communities of color whose needs and hardships were previously neglected.

Joel Brammeier, president and CEO of the Alliance of the Great Lakes, a Joyce partner and grantee for decades, applauded the Foundation for the “very strategic” way it concentrated on “where real power is being built, where an actual shifting of decision-makers’ minds is occurring in ways that truly help the ecosystem and the people that rely on it.”

“These things didn’t just happen,” Brammeier said. “The tools and the policies and the specific movements have shifted, but Joyce maintains that clear focus on the understanding that this is a special place, and we’re going to do this work because it is research-based, and enhances this place, and improves the lives of people.”

The key has been partnering with like-minded organizations across the region. In particular, it has included the Wege Foundation, especially early on, as well as other Great Lakes foundations. Joyce, Wege and the Mott Foundation have been lead supporters of the 170-member strong Healing Our Waters-Great Lakes Coalition, dedicated to “restoring and preserving North America’s greatest freshwater resources, the Great Lakes.”

“What we try to do is not lead by telling other people, ‘Look how smart we are,’” said Ed Miller, co-director of Joyce’s Environment program. “We try to lead by working in actual collaboration with lots of other funders. Sometimes we’re sharing our lessons, but sometimes we’re taking their lessons and applying them.”

ROOTS OF REGIONAL FOCUS

At its roots, Joyce’s dedication to helping restore the Great Lakes is an extrapolated best guess.
The Foundation’s founder, Beatrice Joyce Kean, loved nature, especially the family country estate in northern Minnesota, called Nopeming.” The Foundation eventually gave the property to the Nature Conservancy and its first major grant, in 1973, was $500,000 to the organization to preserve Nopeming.

Keying on what they believed would be the founder’s wishes, Foundation leaders listed conservation among its earliest grantmaking guidelines in 1977. About the same time, it gave the last of the Joyce family land holdings, nearly 13,000 acres of wetlands in Louisiana, to that state to preserve as a natural area.

Then came the federal government’s movement toward deregulation in the early 1980s. It concerned Craig Kennedy, then Joyce’s president, who called for “a serious conversation about conservation of natural resources.” He and Board Member Lewis Butler persuaded the Foundation to make a substantial commitment in 1982: $20 million over 10 years to conserve Midwest soil and Great Lakes water.

Early efforts on soil focused on increasing environmentally sound farming practices, which in the mid-1980s expanded into broader conservation efforts.

But the larger environmental groups that had been working with Joyce on environmental policy efforts were less interested in Great Lakes restoration at the time. So Joyce shifted to a regional approach.

**COORDINATING CONSENSUS**

Over the next four-plus decades, the Foundation built regional partnerships among institutions, researchers, environmental advocates, and funders in the Great Lakes states to take on complex issues such as pollution, invasive species, affordable and equitable access to drinking water, and climate change. It supported scientific and policy research and funded—and in some cases created—groups to do the crucial work.

This is where Joyce’s focus on convening shone through, as it worked to bring together thought leaders and create institutions that could foster nonpartisan consensus in city halls, state capitols and Congress, and even among elected officials in Canada.

One example: Michigan Republican Gov. William Milliken and Wisconsin Democratic Gov. Tony Earl—later a Joyce board member—founded the Council of Great Lakes Governors, which received early funding from Joyce, and the Great Lakes Protection Fund. After his service as Michigan governor, Milliken chaired the Center for the Great Lakes, another group Joyce created in 1982 to coordinate efforts by regional organizations in the U.S. and Canada to push for effective policy.

The list of Great Lakes protections that Joyce and its partners are at least in part responsible for is long. Here’s a sampling:

- In 1989, the Center for the Great Lakes conceived and created the Great Lakes Protection Fund, to finance projects aimed at restoring and maintaining the integrity of the Great Lakes Basin ecosystem. It persuaded the governor of each participating state to appoint two directors and contribute a total of nearly $100 million to fund the organization. Kennedy was a director for Illinois, succeeded by former Joyce board chairman Jack Anderson.

- In 1982, Joyce funded the original planning meeting of Great Lakes United, a network of U.S. and Canadian grassroots advocates that brought concerns to Congress and the International
Joint Commission. That work enhanced protections in the Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, and the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, and fostered funding from the U.S. and Canada for research and monitoring.

- Since the 1980s, Joyce has supported the Northeast-Midwest Institute, which organized and continues to manage the House and Senate Great Lakes Task Forces, a bipartisan group advocating for the Great Lakes. Joyce also is a longtime supporter of the Great Lakes Legislative Caucus, a group of state and provincial lawmakers promoting restoration and protection of the Great Lakes since 2011.

- Groups supported by Joyce and others helped negotiate the Great Lakes Charter in 1985, which set forth shared principles to collectively manage the lake levels and protect the water supply, and the Great Lakes Compact in 2008, which bans the diversion of lakes water outside their collective basin, with limited exceptions.

- Joyce also has funded efforts to prevent invasive species like Big Head, Silver, and Black Carp from entering and spreading in the Great Lakes; helped reduce acid rain by supporting the incorporation of pollution trading into the Clean Air Act of 1990; and funded work on the Great Lakes by national environmental groups such as the National Wildlife Federation, Sierra Club, American Rivers, National Parks Conservation Association/Healing Our Waters Coalition and The Nature Conservancy.

- A landmark turning point came in 2009, when the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) was launched with $475 million in federal funding. Joyce was a longtime supporter of efforts that led to its creation. Between 2010 and 2021, the Initiative committed $3.8 billion in federal spending on Great Lakes projects.

- The GLRI prioritized the clean-up of 43 environmentally degraded “areas of concern” identified by U.S. and Canadian officials in 1987. Sixteen have been restored, including Waukegan Harbor, the Lower Menominee River, Sheboygan River, and Rochester Embayment. The $1 billion investment from the 2022 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law should enable the EPA and other agencies to complete restoration work on most of the remaining sites by 2030.

“They were big bets and the people and organizations involved in them were really fundamental to shaping Great Lakes advocacy for a generation,” Brammeier said.

Molly Flanagan, a Great Lakes policy expert and former Joyce environment grant maker, now vice president of programs and chief operating officer at the Alliance for the Great Lakes, said Joyce’s willingness to fund research, education, and constituency building has been crucial.

“That willingness to take the risk and take a long view on policy is really important,” Flanagan said. “I can’t stress the importance of that enough, because it’s hard to be patient in that way, and I feel like Joyce does a really good job of making investments that allow groups to step in the doorway and get policy passed when the opportunity presents itself.”

EQUITY, LAKE TO TAP

More recently, Joyce has expanded its Great Lakes mission, embracing efforts to assure safe, affordable and equitable access to water for everyone in the region, “from lake to tap.” That effort reflects the
importance of the lakes as a source of drinking water for 40 million people in the region, and long-standing disparities in access, particularly in communities of color. Joyce has prioritized improvements in water infrastructure, the removal of lead pipes, and addressing the emerging problem of groundwater depletion.

Flanagan acknowledged that philanthropies like Joyce and the environmental movement in general had not paid enough attention to the issue. But the drinking water crisis in Flint, Michigan, and the water service shutoffs in Detroit in 2014 and 2015 underscored the huge threat to families and children in the region.

“I do identify that as a failure in terms of coming late to the issue,” she said. “Joyce is working on that now, which I think is really important and a really important evolution of the way that the Foundation thinks about what is a Great Lakes issue.”

RENEWABLE STRATEGY

Over the last two decades, Joyce has applied many of the same lessons and approaches to helping the Great Lakes region deal with climate change and transition to clean energy.

In the 1990s, as climate concerns rose and more attention was paid to airborne toxins, Joyce’s environment program began shifting to include air pollution and climate issues—directing its policy efforts to economically efficient and environmentally sound transportation and making grants focused on electricity generation and energy conservation.

A 2007 summit, funded by Joyce and organized by the Midwest Governors Association, established an Energy Security and Climate Stewardship Platform, which states used to establish energy efficiency requirements for utilities. A decade later, that work led to a more than sevenfold increase in the companies’ investments in energy efficiency. Utilities also invested billions in new wind and solar energy, creating more than half a million clean energy jobs and lessening the health and climate impacts of pollution.

Along the way, not all of Joyce’s investments have paid off. An early effort to support carbon sequestration stumbled, partly due to a focus on too specific a technology. But progress has been undeniable.

In 2021, Illinois became a national leader in the battle against climate change when it committed to a 100 percent carbon-free power sector by 2045. Behind the groundbreaking achievement was a diverse and exceptionally cohesive coalition of advocates supported by Joyce and other foundations.

In 2023, Minnesota became the 17th state to adopt legislation committing to transition to 100 percent carbon-free electricity, while Michigan and Wisconsin also have made advances. The Minnesota measure also was the work of many years and many organizations, including Joyce grantees, and Joyce has been among the leading funders of research throughout the region.

Those efforts have built momentum toward Joyce’s overall objective of helping the entire region achieve just, equitable, carbon-free energy systems by 2040.
“Our goal through 2025 is to make as much progress as possible to remove carbon from the electric power sector,” Miller said. “Then we anticipate that we’ll be working on using that clean electric power supply to decarbonize other sectors of the economy.”

**GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION & JUSTICE REFORM PROGRAM**

**GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION: “WORTH THE RISKS”**

At the time, the list of precautions was warranted.

The Joyce Foundation hired a security consultant who recommended installing cameras and a locked door between the lobby and the Foundation’s working offices. Staff participated in active shooter drills.

It was the early 1990s, before mass shootings and the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 brought sweeping changes to Americans’ sense of security.

The reason for caution? In 1993, at the urging of President Deborah Leff, the Foundation’s board agreed to begin funding research into the causes and solutions to gun violence, at a time when Congress wouldn’t. By making more than $13 million in research grants through the 1990s – and more than $33 million to date – Joyce established itself as a leader in the field. And it has complemented the research funding with equal support for policy development, advocacy and litigation, all with the underlying aim of nurturing safe and just communities in the Great Lakes region and beyond.

Reaction to the new initiative in the 1990s was swift. Joyce was featured on the cover of the National Rifle Association magazine, headlining a story about following the money of the gun safety movement. Posts on the web routinely criticized the Foundation. Staff received threatening phone calls and letters.

“I really want to emphasize how brave the Joyce Foundation was—and to some extent, still is—in this area,” said David Hemenway, director of the Harvard Injury Control Research Center, an early and continuing recipient of Joyce funding.

For the next 30 years, Joyce and its leadership have remained steady in their support of gun violence prevention, aiding research and policy development while tracking the incremental yet significant progress of partners and grantees, even against a stubborn backdrop of tragic headlines about deadly shootings.

“I felt it was our highest and best use,” said Ellen Alberding, the Foundation president since 2002. “We were doing great work, we were going to eventually have some victories, and the rewards were worth the risks. We had all the pieces in place to have an impact.”

**PUBLIC HEALTH THREAT**

In the months leading up to the decision to launch gun violence research in the early ‘90s, Leff and board member Lewis Butler traveled the country talking to leaders in the field and searching for an approach that would move levers to reduce gun violence.

Leff had come to the issue three years earlier, working as a senior producer for ABC News’ Nightline and World News. She had read an article in a medical journal reporting that people in Bangladesh had longer life expectancies than residents in New York City’s Harlem neighborhood. The reason: high rates of gun violence.
“That just really shocked and captivated me,” Leff recalled. When Leff was hired as Joyce president in 1992, gun violence in Chicago was surging—Chicago Police statistics reported 940 homicides that year, up from 660 in 1988, in a period of historically high gun violence.

Most people viewed gun violence as a criminal justice issue, and for the most part, still do. But Leff’s conversations led her to believe that framing gun violence as a public health concern would be more effective at producing change. If research could be done to track risk factors, trends, and causes of gun violence through the lens of public health, evidence-informed policies and strategies could be proposed and imposed.

She also thought that the public health prism was a way to build consensus around a new, highly charged issue for the Foundation. And she knew she had “a daring board” unafraid to take on controversial issues. Their approval was immediate and consistent over the years, even knowing that harassment would be inevitable, which she called “remarkable.”

Nina Vinik, director of Joyce’s Gun Violence Prevention & Justice Reform program from 2008-2021, recalled how the board offered unconditional support for the work, ready to take additional steps to protect her or anyone else who felt threatened.

“When you’re a big fish in a small pond, the target on your back is bigger,” said Vinik, now the founding director of Project Unloaded, a nonprofit aimed at educating youth about gun safety. “But the Foundation stuck with it, and that’s a credit to the leadership of Ellen and the Joyce Board.”

‘SEEING IT THROUGH’

Formal opposition to funding the research only grew. With the NRA flexing its lobbying muscle, Congress imposed the so-called “Dickey Amendment” in 1996, forbidding the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and eventually the National Institutes of Health, from “using funds to advocate for gun control.” The result was a chill on grant money at federal agencies and all efforts to gather and analyze gun violence data.

Over the next two decades, the volume of scientific publications on gun violence fell more than 60 percent, leaving Joyce and just a few other philanthropic foundations to keep the research alive.

“I think it was a very difficult time for everybody,” said Paula Wolff, who served on the Joyce board 1989 to 2021. But she said Joyce’s unwavering approach started with the board’s firm belief in solving the policy problem of gun violence.

“And I think the people who joined the board and stayed on the board respected the culture of the organization—its commitment to controversial and difficult issues,” she added, “and board members wanted to see them through.”

A 2021 study found that over the previous two decades, Joyce was cited as a funder in more than half of published articles on firearm research with private philanthropic funding, more than any source but the National Institutes of Health. Since 1993, Joyce has committed more than $33 million to firearm research grants.

To those outside the foundation, Joyce’s commitment to gun violence research was a profound example of its willingness to take on systemic issues.
Julia Stasch, former president of the MacArthur Foundation and a partner with Joyce in Chicago collaborations such as the Partnership for Safe and Peaceful Communities, which was launched in 2016, said Joyce’s commitment to gun violence research demonstrates its leadership.

“There have been plenty of times when Joyce could have said, ‘Oh my God, the forces against this issue are just too strong, and our potential for impact is so narrow and our allies are so timid, there’s an opportunity cost for this focus,’” Stasch said.

“But I think that adherence to the deep value and ethics that surrounds Joyce’s focus on this issue is stronger than that,” she added. “You really have to respect them for staying the course, in an incredible leadership way, on an issue that defines the polarization in our society.”

INCREMENTAL SUCCESS

Over the years, defining and measuring success in gun violence prevention has been elusive. The number of guns has risen, while the percentage of the public owning guns has fluctuated.

Suicide rates have spiked, as has interpersonal gun violence in cities and accidental shootings among kids, all against a backdrop of relentless headlines about mass shootings.

But incremental progress continues to be made, with passage of numerous gun safety laws in a majority of states. And, while short of what gun safety advocates say is necessary, the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act signed by President Joe Biden in 2022 was historic, the first major federal gun safety legislation since the early 1990s – much of it rooted in research that Joyce supported.

Among other elements was a provision incentivizing states to approve extreme risk protective orders (ERPOs), commonly known as “red flag” laws, which allow for the temporary removal of weapons from an individual posing a threat to themselves or others. Twenty-one states have now adopted such laws. Research showing that they work is among more than 250 peer-reviewed research publications funded by Joyce that have led to seminal findings on gun violence, laid out here in a 25-year review. They include that:

- The U.S. has 25 times the gun homicide rate of comparable countries.
- Gun availability is correlated to higher rates of gun violence.
- The impact of gun violence is very different between rural and urban areas.
- Firearms are the most lethal means of suicide, with a fatality rate of over 90 percent.
- Self-defense using guns is rare; gun victimization is more likely.

In late 2020, Joyce followed up, commissioning a second report laying out the next 100 questions for a research agenda to end gun violence.

“In the first two decades of the 21st century, over half of the foundation-supported gun research articles found in PubMed was funded by this medium-sized foundation in the Midwest. They’re crucial to us,” said Harvard’s Hemenway.
Joyce also is credited with providing the funding to house the research. “I think to this day,” Leff said, “when people are looking for good data on gun violence, they turn to universities, scholars, and research organizations that Joyce funded early on and in some cases helped establish and grow.”

Tim Daly, current director of Joyce’s Gun Violence Prevention and Justice Reform program, says it’s encouraging that more public funding for gun violence research has been flowing in recent years. That has prompted Joyce to think about using its dollars more strategically, including more effective ways to disseminate research findings to policy makers and engaging more in communities where violence is persistent.

“A huge focus now is how we take the things we are starting to learn, convert those findings to new policy and practice ideas, dive into the new research questions, and ensure that the public stays informed along the way,” Daly said.

BUILDING ALLIANCES, SPREADING THE WORD

Joyce also has supported a substantial amount of non-academic research while helping think tanks, hospitals, and faith groups—organizations that include the Violence Policy Center and the Center for American Progress. The Foundation supported the creation of several important advocacy organizations in the field including what is now known as Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America and Guns Down America, and built alliances, helping to coordinate a 2006 convening that led to the creation of Mayors Against Illegal Guns. In an example of its “inside/outside” approach, Joyce worked with the International Association of Chiefs of Police to compile policies to reduce the risks of violence, stop the flow of illegal firearms, and improve police training in a fair and just way.

And it moved behind the scenes to increase the number of donors supporting gun safety by coordinating the establishment of the Fund for a Safer Future. The funding collaborative started in 2011 with five members and a $1 million budget, and since has grown to 35 members with a nearly $5 million budget. The Fund has since made more than $20 million in direct grants, and leveraged another $172 million—in grants for advocacy, research, education, and community-based organizing to reduce gun violence.

In 1998, under then-program officer Roseanna Ander, the Foundation gave Harvard University funding to start what today is the National Violent Death Reporting System or NVDRS. Run by the Centers for Disease Control since 2002, NVDRS is a crucial resource for violence research that links specific data on violent deaths in each state, offering context and insight on the reason for all violent deaths with the goal of using the data to develop violence prevention efforts. Following nearly two decades of support, NVDRS officially expanded to all 50 states in 2018, and recently celebrated more than 20 years of data collection at a first-of-its-kind research conference focused exclusively on NVDRS.

NVDRS was still gaining momentum in 2023, when Michigan and Minnesota launched dashboards to make violent death data more readily available to the public, researchers and journalists.

“The National Violent Death Reporting System would have died on the vine if it hadn’t been for Joyce, and now it’s still up and kicking and growing,” said Carlton Guthrie, a Joyce board member for more than three decades until 2022. “That’s another example of where Joyce was able to take a leadership position, provide support, and attract other resources. Now it’s an initiative that has widespread support and Joyce is still there, convening, driving.”
Hemenway said Joyce was instrumental in garnering financial support for his work from other foundations. “And that’s really because of Joyce’s behind-the-scenes work to make it safe for other foundations to sometimes put money into gun violence research when those foundations didn’t necessarily want their names directly associated with it,” he said.

Daly said Joyce’s full continuum approach of helping develop, adopt, implement, and evaluate policy grounded in research has made a difference. In the past, he said, a lack of research contributed to gun policy debates ending without action after incidents like the 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in which a gunman killed 20 children and six adults.

“But now, I think the investments in research and action over the years helped position the policy to be centered when policymakers are open to making change,” Daly said.

JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY INTERVENTION

Years of working on the issue, and the insights gleaned, eventually led Joyce to better appreciate the role of the criminal justice system in the gun violence issue: In areas with weak gun laws and an environment of violence, people carry guns for protection, often illegally. But the law enforcement response to gun crimes has in many places eroded trust in police, contributed to mass incarceration, and perpetuated cycles of violence.

That realization led Vinik to what she saw as an obvious conclusion when she was running the program: The Foundation also needed to support research into criminal justice reform.

“It was almost as if, ‘How can we not go there?’” Vinik said. “This is an impediment to the kind of progress we need to make. We need to go at it head on.”

In 2018, Joyce formally expanded its gun violence prevention program to include justice reform, which Vinik said needs the “patient capital” that Joyce’s board is willing to provide. The Foundation focuses on building police-community trust, including reducing police use of force and increasing accountability; developing alternatives to arrest and incarceration for young people who commit nonviolent gun offenses, and reimagining public safety.

Board Member Tracey Meares, a Yale Law School professor and leading expert on policing and criminal justice reform, sees Joyce’s shift to public safety and criminal justice reform as one of the Foundation’s most noteworthy successes.

“That obviously is something that’s really important to me, given my work,” she said. “But the bigger point is that when an institution like Joyce puts their effort and attention on that, we’re going to make a difference, and we have.”

More recently, Joyce has expanded its program to be even more comprehensive, joining with others to support the growing field of community-based and community-centered violence intervention strategies. Among its approaches is building a research base to support interventions, elevating the practice of intervention through professional development of its practitioners, and supporting policies to secure public sector support.
One element is the Partnership for Safe and Peaceful Communities, a coalition of more than 50 foundations and other funders launched in 2016 to support community-led, evidence-based solutions to gun violence in Chicago, complemented by research and state and local policy development.

The idea emerged from a post-luncheon chat between Alberding and Stasch, then MacArthur Foundation president, both of whom were upset about a spike in violence and wanted to support a police accountability task force in the city. Since then, PSPC has committed $140 million to support police reform, street outreach, and community safety programs during the typically more violent summer and fall in Chicago.

“It was a big success that we expanded our violence prevention portfolio from focusing on restrictions on gun access to a broader public health approach that includes public safety and institutional reform,” Alberding said. “That’s something that really mattered to me.”

NATIONAL AWARENESS

Despite the setbacks, Joyce staff and board members look back with pride on the efforts over the years. At the very least, they hope the recent increase in public and private funding to examine gun violence suggests that a shift is occurring.

“If it hadn’t been for the work that Joyce had done,” said Mike Brewer, a Joyce board member through the entire period of its violence prevention work, “the ability to even make marginal changes in this area would have been impossible.”

Wolff, another former long-time board member, said part of Joyce’s success is simply in helping expand an understanding of gun violence.

“I think there is much more national awareness among the public, as well as elected officials and the media, about the complications and complexities of gun-carrying and gun-use,” Wolff said.

“We’re not talking about ‘gun control’ anymore. We’re talking about sensible gun laws,” she said. “I think there’s been success in creating a national coalition, and a coalition among foundations, but also among people and families who have been touched by gun violence.”

Said Jose Alvarez, the current Foundation chairman: “It would have been easy, twelve, thirteen, fifteen years ago, to say, ‘Screw this. We’re never going to make progress.’ But that patience has been really important. It’s been almost thirty years of patient, steadfast grantmaking with partners who are devoted to this work. But There’s this sense of, ‘We’ve just got to keep marching forward; keep building the base of research and information, finding policies that work and messages that resonate.’

JOURNALISM PROGRAM

STORYTELLING AND JOURNALISM IN SUPPORT OF GOOD POLICY

For most of its first seven decades, the Joyce Foundation was most comfortable working behind the scenes, allowing its front-line partners and grantees to be the focus of media attention around their efforts to improve lives in the Great Lakes region.

That began to change in late 2018, about the time Elizabeth Cisar and Kayce Ataiyero were chatting in the Foundation office’s café.
Cisar, Joyce’s Environment Program co-director, expressed concerns that Chicago’s building boom was transferring industries and their health hazards to the city’s already-industrialized South and Southeast Sides, endangering the health of the city’s most vulnerable children. The exchange led to an opinion column by Cisar in the Chicago Sun-Times, citing data behind the dangers, which environmental activists later used to advocate at City Hall.

The moment reflected a new approach for Joyce—one that views storytelling and the capacity to communicate as tools to elevate grantees’ work. At the same time, Joyce made another forward-looking strategic shift, becoming more intentional about supporting independent, high-quality journalism as the news media and public affairs reporting continues to shrink across the region.

“What was striking was that Joyce had this abundance of stories about the work that we were doing that was inherently relevant to major issues,” said Ataiyero, who had prior experience in journalism and strategic communications for elected officials. “The organizations we were funding were at key intersections in the conversations around these issues, so there were a lot of natural entry points for Joyce into those conversations.”

She saw Joyce’s untapped strategic communications potential as a way to strengthen grantees’ efforts, regardless if it drew more attention or criticism.

“It’s never been about promoting Joyce for the sake of promoting Joyce,” Ataiyero said. “Aside from our financial resources, our second greatest asset is our voice, the position that we hold in the civic landscape, the ability that we have to vouch for people and for ideas, to draw attention to ideas. The taller platform we build for the Foundation, the higher shoulders that our grantees have to stand on.”

To make the case, Ataiyero applied the Foundation’s own evidence-based approach to its work. She circulated examples where Joyce’s storytelling helped move the needle on issues or received encouraging feedback from grantees and peers in philanthropy. Recent op-ed columns by Joyce Foundation President Ellen Alberding on the restoration and protection of the Great Lakes and gun safety each provided important exposure for grantees’ work.

Alberding said she would like the Foundation to become even more effective at telling the story of philanthropy’s impact, although she acknowledged that the new approach is an adjustment. She sees herself as much more effective working in the background.

“Early on I was all about promoting the grantees, that this is all about them and in almost every way, it still is. They’re doing all the work,” she said. “But now I see the value of telling these stories maybe a little more forcefully.”

The Joyce board of directors has encouraged the shift.

“Ellen has turned communication into a real forceful function, a cross-cutting function within the organization itself,” said Mike Brewer, a board member. “She’s also supported working to make our program officers more comfortable being media savvy, and working with grantees in the same way.”

Added Bob Bottoms, another long-term board member who served for more than 25 years before retiring in 2023: “The foundation has always done good work. In the early years, I thought perhaps the one shortcoming we had was getting the word out and publicizing the success of the grants and the
research that was completed. However, since Ellen has become president, she has done a magnificent job of drawing attention to our work.

The launch of the Journalism Program

Meanwhile, Joyce has expanded its support for independent journalism, recognizing that the collapse of fact-based public affairs reporting would undermine democracy and smart policy-making.

For several years, Joyce has invested in credible, independent media outlets that cover its issues, such as the Trace, which focuses on gun violence and gun violence prevention; Chalkbeat, which covers K-12 education; and Midwest Energy News, which covers utilities and the transition to renewable energy sources. But in 2021, it formalized and expanded that support, making Journalism its sixth and newest core program.

Among newer initiatives are support for Chicago Public Media’s acquisition of the Chicago Sun-Times, a possible model for sustainable nonprofit news. Another is support for workshops by the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and the Association of Health Care Journalists that connect reporters with research, data, and experts.

The program is managed by Hugh Dellios, a former correspondent and editor with the Chicago Tribune, Associated Press, and NPR. He is one of four former journalists on the Joyce staff.

“Joyce should be commended for realizing that if independent journalism disappears, it undermines everything else the Foundation is trying to do,” Dellios said. “Journalists being journalists, sometimes they produce stories that foundations don’t like. But what they do is critical for a healthy exchange of ideas, uncovering solutions, and holding our leaders accountable for what they do.”