

Inside Philanthropy

GRANTFINDER LEARN ISSUES PLACES CAREER CENTER 



Six Questions with Mendi Blue Paca, New President of Fairfield County's Community Foundation

Mike Scutari | October 25, 2022



MENDI BLUE PACA

In mid-September, Fairfield County's Community Foundation (FCCF) in Norwalk, Connecticut, announced that [Mendi Blue Paca](#) would be its new president and CEO. Blue Paca previously served as the FCCF's chief community impact officer, leading the

foundation's grantmaking programs, policy advocacy, and community leadership initiatives to close the opportunity gap in the county.

Follow the Money!

Want to get inside funders' heads? Sign up for our email updates.

Email Address

SIGN UP



Check out IP's directory of philanthropy and fundraising consultants. Browse the listings for your next project. Apply to join the directory. Annual IP membership required.

Featured Jobs

Born and raised in the state, Blue Paca holds a bachelor's degree in economics from Harvard College, a juris doctorate from Harvard Law School, and a master's in business administration from Harvard Business School. Before joining FCCF, Blue Paca was a registered broker and compliance officer at Goldman Sachs & Co., a strategy manager at the Center for Effective Philanthropy, and a growth and innovation advisor to the president of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. She has also served as a strategic consultant to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, [the Ford Foundation](#), and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

Blue Paca succeeds [Juanita James](#), who had led FCCF for the previous 11 years and oversaw over \$204 million in discretionary grantmaking during her tenure. The foundation has awarded more than \$390 million since its inception in 1992 and has approximately \$258.8 million in net assets.

I spoke with Blue Paca on October 7 — four days after her official start date and about three weeks before FCCF announced its new strategic framework, Fairfield County Forward. Our chat hit on her jump from Wall Street to philanthropy, the best advice she's ever received, and how community foundations can constructively talk about race. Here are some excerpts from that discussion, which have been edited for clarity.

What made you decide you wanted to work in the nonprofit sector?

Find Jobs

GO

[Director of Development \(Administrator II\) -](#)

[College of Business and Public Policy](#)

Carson, CA - [California State University,](#)

[Dominguez Hills](#)

[Director of Development \(Administrator II\)](#)

Carson, CA - [California State University,](#)

[Dominguez Hills](#)

[Director of Development, UCLA](#)

[Chancellor's Society](#)

Los Angeles, CA - [University of California](#)

[Los Angeles](#)

[Associate Vice President of Development](#)

Boston, MA - [Brigham and Women's](#)

[Hospital](#)

[Portfolio Manager, Network Grants -](#)

[Growald Climate Fund](#)

[Post a Job](#) [More jobs](#)

Powered by [ymcareers](#)
by communitybrands

I come from a family that's deeply rooted in public service, and the values I learned growing up guided my passions and career choices. My great-grandmother, who's my daughter's namesake, was the only Black midwife in her community in Rock Hill, South Carolina. As the story goes, she delivered all the Black babies in the community during a time of segregation when Black women didn't have the same access to hospitals and quality of care as white women.

Her work was an act of public service and community-building. It was an effort to provide access and opportunity and a fair start for Black children. I also think about her daughter, my grandmother. I remember she would provide financial support for members of our extended family, especially as they migrated from the South to the North. So I think that mindset of sacrifice and giving back extends across multiple generations in my family, and I hope to pass it on to my children.

After graduating from college, I worked in finance at Goldman Sachs. But after working in the corporate sector, I felt like it was out of alignment with the mark that I wanted to leave on the world. So I decided to go back to law school, but ultimately followed a path that aligned more with my family's values, and, frankly, my own values. I believe we all have a responsibility to create equitable systems and structures, and in my new role, I have an opportunity to do that in a significant way at the community level.

Who are your biggest influences?

That's an easy question because it's always the same answer. My parents are far and away my biggest influences. They're just good, decent people with great values and strong spirits. They instilled in me a commitment to be kind, persevere through adversity, and push beyond any limitations placed on me.

More than anything, they've always believed in me and supported me unconditionally. I'm keenly aware of what a blessing it's been to have had that kind of support, and that inspires me to want to work harder on behalf of people who don't have that good fortune.

That all became very salient for me when my father passed away seven years ago. I marveled at the number of people — and these were people I barely knew, or in some cases, I didn't know at all — who came to pay their respects and reflect on the simple but profound ways that he had impacted their lives. My family and I didn't know many of these stories, because he didn't do it for credit or acknowledgement. I still have a long way to go down that kind of imprint, but I do feel like my parents have given me a great roadmap for meaningful impact.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever received?

Early in my career, when I was working at Goldman Sachs, I ran into [Stephanie Bell-Rose](#), who was head of the bank's foundation at the time. We were actually in a lunch line. I was a first- or second-year analyst, and Stephanie was someone I looked up to. I was very excited to have the opportunity to introduce myself to

her, and we ended up chatting as we worked our way through the line waiting for our food.

During the conversation, I asked her for advice on how I could have the type of impact she'd had in her career, and she told me that there was no blueprint. She challenged me to think expansively and creatively and to follow my own path. That insight helped change my outlook on my career, so rather than following the expected trajectory, I followed my passions and maximized whatever opportunities came along the way.

Ultimately, it led me to Fairfield County, and now I think I have the chance to address the extreme racial disparities that we see in our county and throughout many communities. So as I move into my new role, I'm trying to keep that mindset in mind and carry forward the work.

What makes you optimistic about the state of philanthropy? Pessimistic?

When I look at the accomplishments of my predecessor in this role, Juanita James, it's amazing to me the glass ceilings that she and her colleagues shattered along the way. Now, there's an incredible changing of the guard happening in philanthropic leadership across the country, and with it, attention to new focus areas, particularly a focus on understanding and undoing the impacts of systemic racism.

I also think it's critical that we're challenging our organizations to use our power differently and be guided by those most impacted by inequity. All of this

gives me hope that philanthropy can truly change systems.

Where I'm pessimistic is my fear about whether that momentum is sustainable. The problems that we're tackling were centuries in the making, and I hope that we'll have the [patience and the courage](#) it's going to take to undo them and that the pendulum doesn't swing back to more traditional and more comfortable approaches to philanthropy.

What was the last great book you read?

I've been reading Robert Livingston's "[The Conversation: How Seeking and Speaking the Truth About Racism Can Radically Transform Individuals and Organizations.](#)" I think that too often, community foundations have been hesitant to talk about race and racism for fear that it might turn off parts of their communities or even potential donors. But when we talk about race in ways that make it easy for people to wrap their heads around, you can transform their understanding, and this book gives us a great guide for how to do that.

In fact, we co-hosted a conversation with our board and community members this week, and Dr. Livingston joined us, and he communicates in a simple yet insightful way. It can be difficult to pull off that combination, but it's so powerful when it's done effectively.

The foundation just rolled out a new strategic framework. Can you walk me through that process?

I moved into this role at an important time for our community and our foundation. Prior to becoming CEO, I was the foundation’s chief community impact officer, where I was working alongside our leadership team and partners to address the systems and structures that have led our community to having one of the largest wealth gaps in the United States.

As a result of that process, we have a **new strategic framework** called Fairfield County Forward. It’s our commitment to partnering with our community to ensure that every person has an equitable opportunity to thrive. It’s a major undertaking, but I’m excited about working to achieve what’s now this North Star goal for us – the possibility that our community can be one where everyone has true mobility, access, autonomy, and a fair shot. I’m thrilled and eager to get started.

Correction: This post has been corrected to reflect the FCCF’s most recent net assets and total grantmaking figures.

Featured



Six Questions with Mendi Blue Paca, New President of Fairfield County’s Community Foundation

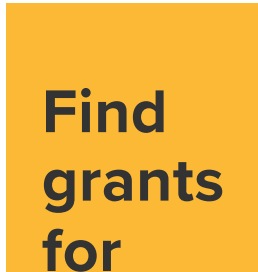
Six Questions for Alberto Mejia, National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures Deputy Director

Seven Questions for Toya Fick, the New CEO of Meyer Memorial Trust

Seven Questions for Amy Freitag, the New York Community Trust’s New President

Team Lift: Foundations and Labc The Bezos Family Committed \$7

Explore GrantFinder, a powerful resource for IP subscribers.



Become a member and find grants for nonprofits with our extensive research on who's funding what and why.

SUBSCRIBE

Follow IP



Quick Links

- About Us
- Contact Us
- Consultants Directory
- FAQ & Help
- Terms of Use
- Privacy Policy

Become a Subscriber

- Individual
- Subscriptions →
- Multi-User
- Subscriptions →

Follow the money! Get our daily email

Sign Up

Inside Philanthropy

