DONOR STORY

BUILDING A LEGACY: CHERYL AND ZED FRANCIS GIVE A HAND UP

For Cheryl and Zed Francis, philanthropy is a way of life—and has been for decades.

Nearly 50 years ago, the young newlyweds had just graduated from Cornell University. That summer, they came to Chicago to attend business school at the University of Chicago. Scholarships made the move possible—and they've been here ever since.

Today, Cheryl and Zed are paying it forward, giving back to the community that embraced them.

They both started their careers in banking and finance. Zed held several executive leadership roles at Bank of America and its predecessors. Cheryl served as Treasurer of FMC Corporation and then Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer of R.R. Donnelley and Sons Co. Today, she serves on multiple corporate boards and is co-founder and co-chairman of Corporate Leadership Center, a nonprofit that advances corporate leaders and leadership practices.

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>
> **ZED FRANCIS**

Throughout their careers, Cheryl and Zed prioritized workplace giving. United Way of Metro Chicago was their charity of choice.

"When we came into the business world in Chicago, United Way was the organization that all the corporations supported," Cheryl said. "Everybody participated in workplace campaigns. It was a way to give back and feel engaged with what was happening in the city and surrounding communities."

As long-time United Way donors through workplace giving, Cheryl and Zed knew they wanted to deepen their impact. United Way's Neighborhood Network Initiative—a wraparound, place-based approach to community development—was the answer.

"The scale was impressive. To transform a community, you have to transform employment, housing, and improve the whole economic lot," Zed said. "We connected with the Neighborhood Network Initiative and believed in it. United Way is effective in understanding that you can't transplant something into a community. You've got to provide resources and work within the community in full partnership."

In 2019, Cheryl and Zed invested $500,000 in the Austin Neighborhood Network. Over the last five years, their generous gift has helped the neighborhood's goals come to life. In 2023, BUILD Chicago's sprawling youth and community center opened. Earlier this summer, United Way and our partners celebrated the ribbon cutting of the Aspire Center for Workforce Innovation, the brainchild of Austin Coming Together and Westside Health Authority. The formerly shuttered Emmet Elementary School will be a hub for economic and workforce development on the West Side.

As savvy businesspeople, Cheryl and Zed want their investments to be successful. The positive change happening in Austin is proof that place-based investment works, which is why they've dedicated another $500,000 gift—this time in the Little Village Neighborhood Network.

"When Zed and I think about our major gifts, it's through a 'hand up' approach," Cheryl said. "Our gifts aren't designated so that the people who are on ground can figure out the best use of the funds based on their community's plans and priorities. They can do more with the investment, and it grows and sustains itself. The Neighborhood Network is that kind of model."

"This type of investment is more complicated and takes longer, but you have the opportunity to make a

significant and sustainable impact," Zed added.

Latinos Progresando and Enlace are leading the work in Little Village and have had a big impact on the community over the past 20 years. Most recently they celebrated the opening of the Little Village community center in 2023 and the launch of the Little Village-South Lawndale Quality of Life Plan in 2024.

Cheryl and Zed's gift to the Little Village Neighborhood Network will build on this momentum, Cheryl said. "Little Village is a very entrepreneurial community, the perfect place for a 'hand up.' They take an investment and run with it. With the right funding and attention, they are making the community strong and giving people a lot of opportunities."

The gift to Little Village also marked the end of Cheryl's tenure on United Way's board and serving as Chair from 2021–2023. The investment was an opportunity to leave her mark as a long-time United Way volunteer and leader.

For both Cheryl and Zed, the work isn't done—and they hope others will join them.

"There's no end point. The question is, how do we make things better?" Cheryl said. "United Way is in a unique position. It's trusted by the community, government, corporate partners, and foundations and can get the right people at the table. We hope that others will say, 'That sounds like a good idea. I'd like to do that.' Together, we can continue to accelerate the work and see more success."

Cheryl and Zed believe supporting United Way is the answer.

"We hope that our commitment is a catalyst," Zed said. "If you develop the right relationships with the right people, things will be carried forward. Whether we're here or not, we've got confidence that will happen. United Way is a place that can make a difference."

JOIN US! Donate today and help build a stronger Chicago region where all our neighbors can thrive.