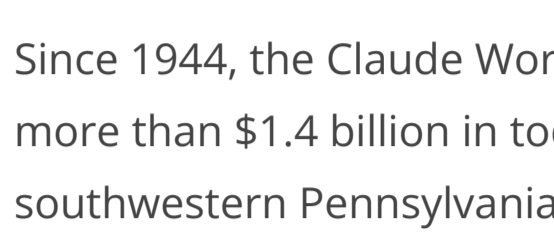


THE STATE JOURNAL

Philanthropy's role in West Virginia's next chapter

by Jennifer Giovannitti Mar 20, 2026 2 min to read

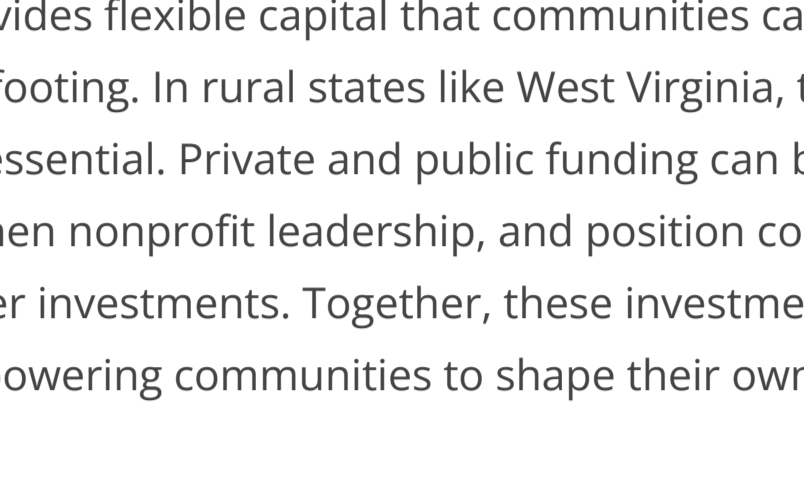
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Few decisions carry the power to change generations of lives. Eighty years ago, Michael Benedum did just that.

In his final codicil, he directed the hard-earned wealth he built over a lifetime toward the public good, with particular care for his beloved home state of West Virginia. Rooted in both generosity and responsibility, Benedum reflected that "we know not where seed may sprout" — an incredible reminder that intentional investment can shape communities in ways we cannot always foresee.

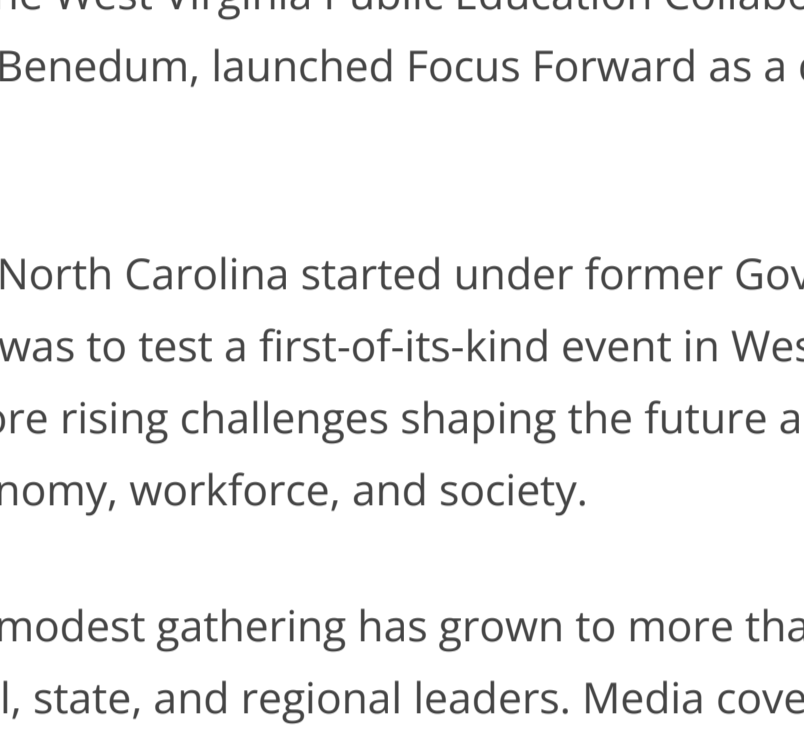
Since 1944, the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation has distributed more than \$1.4 billion in today's dollars across West Virginia and southwestern Pennsylvania.



Philanthropy provides flexible capital that communities can use to strengthen their footing. In rural states like West Virginia, that flexibility is not a luxury. It's essential. Private and public funding can build local capacity, strengthen nonprofit leadership, and position communities to compete for larger investments. Together, these investments build momentum, empowering communities to shape their own future.

The Benedum Foundation honors this philanthropic approach inspired by Michael and Sarah Benedum. We intentionally support projects and initiatives where communities and leaders drive their own progress. West Virginians understand that lasting progress does not come from any one sector alone. It emerges when education aligns with industry. When research informs practice. And when communities come together with shared purpose to think long term about the future.

Focus Forward, an annual event open to the public, embodies this approach.



Eight years ago, the West Virginia Public Education Collaborative, in partnership with Benedum, launched Focus Forward as a deliberate act of convening.

Inspired by what North Carolina started under former Governor James B. Hunt Jr., the goal was to test a first-of-its-kind event in West Virginia to explore rising challenges shaping the future and what they mean for the economy, workforce, and society.

What began as a modest gathering has grown to more than 500 attendees spanning national, state, and regional leaders. Media coverage has expanded. Survey data has consistently shown that participants leave with ideas they apply in their businesses, classrooms, nonprofits, and public institutions. Indeed, dialogue has extended well beyond the event itself, influencing regional strategy and contributing to statewide conversations, including Dr. Clay Marsh's white paper on longevity and human flourishing. These ideas did not stay on stage. They moved into practice.

On April 1, Focus Forward will convene again. Business executives, nonprofit leaders, philanthropists, educators, policymakers, students, and community members will gather to examine how West Virginia can prepare for its best future. This year, we will once again up the ante. We are excited to nudge conversation into action through two \$10,000 mini-grant opportunities.

This is philanthropy in full expression. Convene. Learn. Activate. Reinforce.

Focus Forward reflects Benedum's philanthropic approach of cross-sector collaboration for progress. This event has created space for thoughtful dialogue, strategic alignment, and shared momentum at a time when our region faces both significant challenges and extraordinary opportunities.

Philanthropy exists to keep hope alive for the future. It alone cannot shape West Virginia's future, but it can catalyze the partnerships, ideas, and confidence that allow communities to shape it themselves. That is the invitation. To philanthropists considering how to invest. To business leaders navigating rapid change. To educators preparing for the next generation. To citizens who believe this state's best chapters are still ahead.

History reminds us that we do not always know where seeds will sprout. But we do know that without planting, nothing grows.

Eighty years ago, philanthropy helped lay groundwork for the curious people of West Virginia to meet and think about the future. The future can either shape itself, or we can cultivate it with West Virginia's ingenuity, values, and people at the forefront of change.

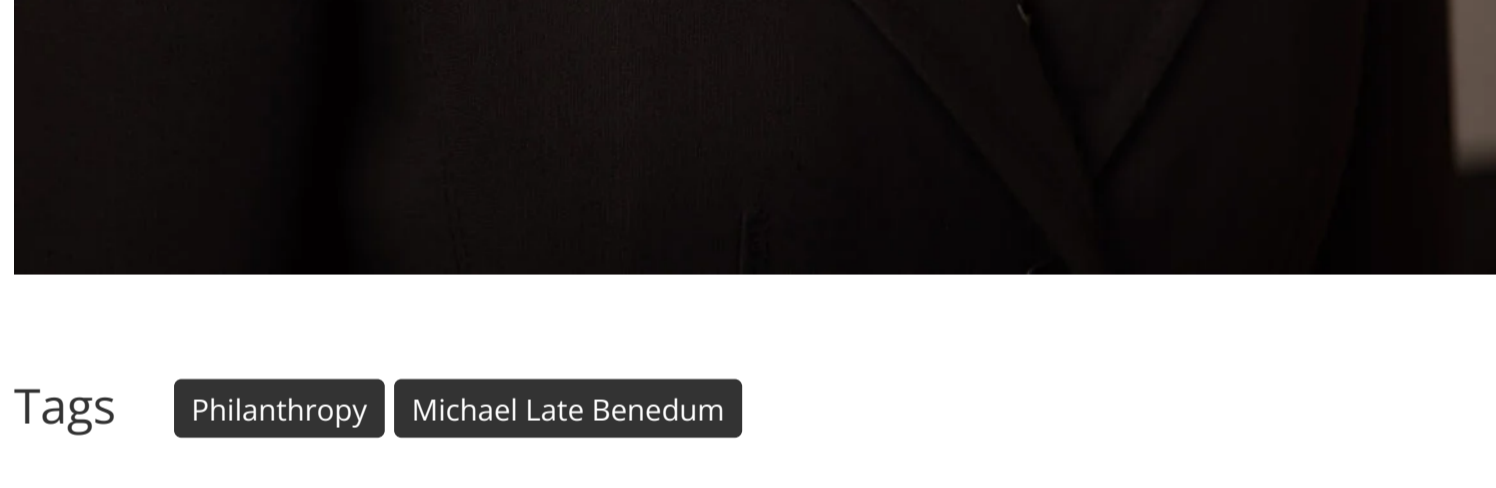
Jennifer Giovannitti is president of the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation.



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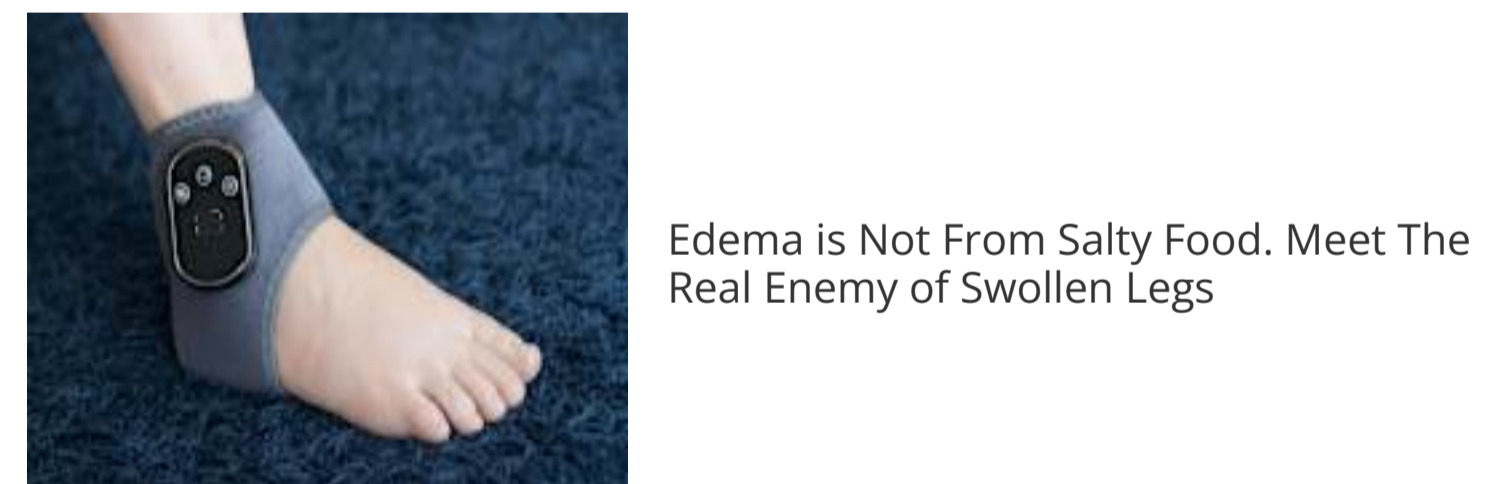
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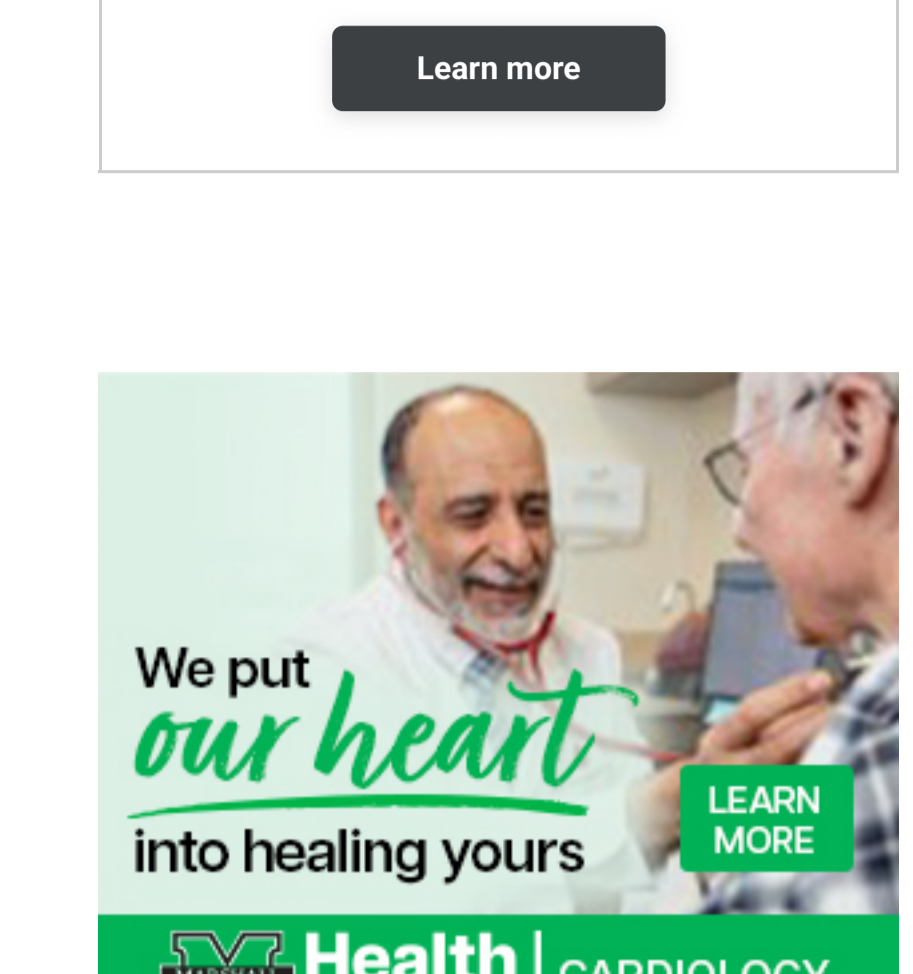
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