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Beloved businesswoman leaves \$4 million gifts to Columbus Urban League, Franklin Park Conservatory



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The Columbus Urban League and Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens have received their largest, one-time gifts ever.

Former Columbus Fair Auto Auction owner Alexis Jacobs bequeathed \$4 million in unrestricted funds to each of the organizations.

A longtime supporter of both nonprofits, Jacobs died on June 3 at age 80.

“I just started bawling,” said Stephanie Hightower, president and CEO of the Columbus Urban League. “You never know what kind of impact you’re having on someone.”

Bruce Harkey, president and CEO of Franklin Park Conservatory said he was “gobsmacked.”

“We had no idea,” he said. “Obviously, she was a dear friend of the conservatory, and we miss her dearly. It was an emotional moment.”

Hightower said Jacobs understood the “philanthropic redlining practices,” which has resulted in a pattern of Black-led organizations receiving less funding, as well as grants that are limited to programming.

Jacobs' gift will allow the Columbus Urban League to continue to build capacity, potentially through an endowment, Hightower explained.

“Now, I can begin to think more innovatively and start looking at the sustainability of the operation as opposed to living hand-to-mouth every year.”

Hightower said she is especially looking forward to hiring more talent and providing better wages.

“We have to stop looking at the human services industry and thinking that people will want to come and work for \$45,000 because they’re committed,” she said. “They still have to live.”

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The conservatory also is considering an endowment with the gift.

Harkey said the board is considering ways to advance the organization's mission "through educational programs or additional capital improvements, and even increasing our board reserves for financial sustainability.”

Conservatory through the years: A look back

Born March 28, 1942, Jacobs started working in the accounting department of the Oetz-based Columbus Fair Auto Auction, which her father started in 1959. When he died in the 1980s, she ran the business until 2019, when she sold it to XLerate Group.

Jacobs was a lifelong philanthropist, according to Greg Levi, the executor of Jacobs’ estate.

“She just didn’t give money to give money,” said Levi, who formerly served as president and COO of the Columbus Fair Auto Auction. “She knew the objective, she knew the mission, she knew the leadership and she invested in it.”

Levi said Jacobs also inspired others to give. She even allowed her employees to volunteer for events such as the Special Olympics during the workday — and paid them as if they working their regular shifts.

Levi also said Jacobs chose to invest in the Columbus Urban League and Franklin Park Conservatory because she connected with Hightower and Harkey, as well as their missions.

“When you sit and listen to Stephanie talk about her passion and the mission, it’s hard not to want to participate,” he said.

Jacobs also hired formerly incarcerated workers who took part in the Columbus Urban League’s workforce development program.

Jacobs also was impressed with Harkey's commitment to helping people.

“His mission just wasn’t about making the conservatory big,” Levi said. “(He) spoke about education and exposing opportunities to people that otherwise wouldn’t get (them), and she bit on that. That gave her every inspiration to want to participate.”

While Jacobs was alive, she made a capital contribution to the conservatory, establishing memorials in her parents' honor on the community garden grounds. She also was a fixture at the "Hat Day" fundraiser.

"We considered her a fashionista," said Hightower, who previously worked for Columbus College of Art & Design, and collaborated with Jacobs on the CCAD Fashion Show. "If anybody could dress, she could dress."

The two women also bonded over sports — Jacobs was a fisherwoman — while Jacobs bonded with Harkey over automobiles.

"It was just thrilling to meet a woman who was so incredibly successful and savvy in what is typically a very male-dominated industry," Harkey said.

Harkey also marveled at Jacobs' ability to bring people together.

"It was this really multiplying effect that she had by developing a great relationship with people she cared for, but also expanding their quality of life by introducing them to her other friends and people that she knew would get along," he said. "She was a great connector."

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