



A PIONEERING SPIRIT

The Anna+Anton Olson Legacy Foundation seeks to enhance resiliency among nonprofits in eastern Williamson County



BY NICOLE LESSIN

TAYLOR – In spring 2023, when Diana Phillips first pitched an idea to fund an assessment to identify community needs in Taylor to Larry Olson, the founder of The Anna+Anton Olson Legacy Foundation, she was blown away by his generous response.

“We had coffee, and I was going to ask him for \$5,000,” said Phillips, the president of the Greater Taylor Foundation. “But halfway through my presentation and my spiel for funding,

Larry looks me in the eye, and he says, ‘Diana ... I love what you are doing. I love Taylor, and I am going to give you \$10,000.’”

Thus began a partnership that has subsequently resulted in a treasure trove of data in Taylor on gaps in community access to child care, nutritious food, housing, mental-health services and more — just as eastern Williamson County braces for exponential growth, Phillips said.

“Larry was one of the first funders for the needs assessment,” Phillips said. “(Since then) multiple foundations have come together to fund that first phase of the initiative... and it was really important because Taylor is different from the rest of the county, and we didn’t have any local data — and that data has become golden.”

Though he grew up in San Antonio and lives in Georgetown, Olson, an architect and former chief technology officer for Texas and Pennsylvania, and former deputy state treasurer of Pennsylvania, said he has strong roots that go back generations in East Wilco.

Olson launched Anna+Anton in 2021 to honor his beloved Swedish grandparents, Anna and Anton Olson, two pioneering farmers who emigrated independently on a ship in steerage class as teenagers in the early 1900s, but who would meet in Chicago, marry, move to Texas, and eventually prosper on a 184-acre farm they purchased near Taylor in the 1930s.

“Williamson County had the largest concentration of Swedish settlers in Texas,” Olson said. “That may have been what brought them here.”

Anna+Anton, which recently completed its fourth grant cycle, has provided about \$150,000 each year to more than a dozen nonprofits in Georgetown, Hutto and Taylor, which allow underserved children and youth to grow and thrive, foster entrepreneurship for disadvantaged youth and young adults, and promote independence and dignity for seniors living at home — for a total of more than \$700,000.

OPERATIONS AND CHANGING QUICKLY

Since its inception, Anna+Anton has operated under the umbrella of two organizations, the Chisholm Trail Communities Foundation and the Central Texas Community Foundation, both tax-exempt public charities that allow private individuals such as Olson to harness their wealth towards making a long-term impact in the community.

“The nice thing is my foundation has the ability to change quickly,” Olson said. “I keep looking at ways to strengthen what my investment is into the community

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and see how I can have the best impact through my grants,” Olson said. “And I’m willing to change and pioneer part of that strategy.”

Though the vast majority of Anna+Anton grants have been to nonprofit organizations in Georgetown, Olson has also recently awarded \$10,000 to the Dickey Museum & Multipurpose Center to launch a series of workshops for disadvantaged students from Taylor High School beginning this month, as well as a grant to the Hutto Resource Center to upgrade its aging heating, ventilation and air-condition system in the food pantry.

Olson said he is hoping to get more grant applications from nonprofit organizations in the Taylor and Hutto area.

“I have a really special kind of focus on Taylor,” Olson said. “I have three communities, but as a little kid I would stay summers with my grandma and grandpa out on the farm outside of Taylor. I have so many memories of being with them. And one of them is being in the Howard Theatre with grandma and

grandpa and walking around with them on the Fourth of July in Murphy Park.”

AN ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT

Olson said his hardworking grandparents instilled in him a love of his Swedish heritage, as well as an entrepreneurial spirit, which served him well during his career and led him to work in Sweden as an architect, and hold many leadership positions in finance as well in the public sector.

“My grandpa was bigger than life to me, and also my grandma,” Olson said. “They would tell me about Sweden in the evenings, and it just got me indoctrinated. In elementary school, any report I had to write, somehow it had to do with Sweden.”

Olson said his dad, Ed Olson, who grew up speaking Swedish and lived on the farm near Taylor, was a graduate of Taylor High in 1935.

Despite many challenges his grandparents faced, including losing a portion of a farm they purchased in Crystal City, Olson said he remembers always seeing them working and focused on getting ahead.

“I have a distinct memory of grandpa out on his tractor, and every day my grandma would be at the radio, right before noon, writing down corn prices and all the stocks because grandpa was starting to get into stocks, and they didn’t have laptops,” Olson said.



Larry Olson presents a check June 11, 2024, to the Boys and Girls Club of East Williamson County. Courtesy photo

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CAN-DO SPIRIT

Today, carrying on that can-do spirit and tradition is a major focus of The Anna+Anton Olson Legacy Foundation.

“That is one of the values, responding to nonprofit needs and being willing to change and keep moving forward,” Olson said.

Though Anna+Anton initially focused on providing programming support for local organizations, more recently the foundation has shifted gears to helping fill in both short-term funding gaps and long-term capacity building for nonprofits — to make them more resilient, Olson said.

“These are the type of projects that few donors I’ve noticed really like to fund because most donors like to fund where there are a lot of kids doing things or feeding seniors or something like this, not the back-office issues, but it’s all so critical,” Olson said. “So that’s why I decided, I don’t need the glamour. I just want to make sure I do whatever I can to strengthen the nonprofits ... To make them stronger and more sustainable in their communities.”

Daniel Anstee, the area director of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Texas, said Boys and Girls Club of East Williamson County received a three-year, \$50,000 grant from Olson to increase capacity in conjunction with the Williamson County Institute for Nonprofit Excellence, for its location in Taylor.

“We had only been in operation a year or two,” Anstee said. “It was an opportunity for us to stretch ourselves and look at how our operation was functioning, rather than just sinking a certain amount of the money into the operations. One of the byproducts that Larry was looking for was a strategic plan, so that has been what we have been working on for the past three years.”

Anstee said Olson’s support has been timely and vital.

“Any funding is critical, especially in this day and age,” Anstee said. “I can’t speak for everyone, but coming out of COVID, there was plenty of support for nonprofits, but now that support is drying up, so being able to use money that builds capacity within the organization brings board members into an environment where we are able to come up with goals and objectives on how to strengthen the organization—and that is extremely important.”