

2025 Carter Wickwire Philanthropy Award

Eric and Patti Poppe have used their professional success and love of robotics to make a significant impact in furthering access to STEM education on a local, state, and national level.

Patti was born and raised in Jackson, Michigan as the daughter of an engineer at Consumers Energy. Patti received her bachelor's and master's degree in industrial engineering from Purdue University and a master's degree in management from Stanford University's Graduate School of Business eventually serving as the first female CEO of a Fortune 500 company, Consumers Energy. Eric was born in Nebraska and received his engineering degree from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He has been a long-standing engineer at General Motors Corporation and an avid robotics mentor.

Leadership: Eric and Patti have twin daughters who have followed in their footsteps, both pursuing degrees in the engineering field. The Poppe's are enthusiastic about narrowing the gender gap in STEM related fields. Eric says the couple's cultural awareness affected how they raised their twin daughters. "Girls and boys have equal capabilities, and we helped our girls recognize that," he says. "I hope that when my daughters enter the workforce, they find that gender is simply not an issue. Maybe that's a little optimistic, but when I consider my own workplace, I feel that's a pretty realistic expectation." The Poppe's do not just speak about the issues that concern them, they act. The Eric and Patricia Poppe Scholarship Endowment in Industrial Engineering at Purdue University with a preference to female undergraduates in good standing, has helped contribute to the rise of female engineering students at Purdue.

Commitment: In February of 2020, Patti and Eric donated over \$1.55M to start a donor advised fund (DAF) at the Jackson Community Foundation (JCF). The Dream Maker Fund was established to support STEM education and particularly opportunities for students to participate in FIRST robotics at a local, and state level. They have continued their commitment by making a reoccurring gift to their fund to support the annual grantmaking to the nonprofit organizations doing this important work.

Creativity: Shortly after starting their fund in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The Poppe's wanted to help local business owners suffering from the financial impact caused by the pandemic. They quickly pivoted and used their DAF at JCF to create the Small Business Emergency Relief Fund to help cover the short-term gaps small businesses faced until state and federal resources became available. Patti was quoted as saying "We like to say at Consumers Energy that no one can do everything, but everyone can do something. I think it's important that we all do what we can right now to help our friends and neighbors. Small businesses are the heart of our state, and my husband and I are hopeful that we can do our part to help the businesses in our hometown through this extraordinary time."

Collaboration: JCF partnered with the Enterprise Group and a dedicated grant committee over the next few months to seek proposals from small businesses in Jackson County. By May of 2020, two months into the pandemic, over \$1M in grants

were distributed to 297 small businesses in Jackson County. It was determined that approximately 2,000 jobs in Jackson County were positively impacted.

Impact: After the first year's response to support small businesses in Jackson County, they were able to get back to the original purpose of their fund and support robotics programming in Jackson and across Michigan. To date, approximately \$4.6M has been granted from their fund, primarily to robotics and STEM related programs. Locally, the two largest benefactors have been the College and Career Access Center and the Shop Rat Foundation for their work in providing accessible robotics and STEM related programs across the K-12 system in Jackson County. Statewide, they have supported FIRST in Michigan, founded to give more MI students access to FIRST programs by engaging local sponsors and resources in support of teams and events.

As their careers have grown and Patti became the CEO of Pacific Gas and Electric, they have continued to support their efforts in Jackson, across Michigan AND they have also started to support robotics programming in California where they currently reside. Together, the Poppe's make a dynamic team working together to make a brighter future accessible to all our children.

Approved by the Jackson Community Foundation Board of Trustees on October 31, 2024.