



# A catalyst for CHANGE

## Crisis center empowers the community to stop domestic violence

**T**he Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center is on a mission to end domestic violence.

The Cummings Foundation has awarded the Newburyport-based nonprofit \$583,330 to help it carry out its goal to strengthen and support victims.

The Geiger center is now more than halfway through a 10-year, \$333,000 grant awarded in 2020.

Jim Kraus, a Cummings Foundation volunteer and retired business professional who lives in Newburyport, has observed the crisis center's day-to-day operations.

He says that the organization has a strategic plan and leadership and has been constantly on the move, looking for innovative ways to fulfill its mission.

Suzanne Dubus, executive director since 1997, says that Cummings awards have helped the center extend leadership and prevention programs to youths.

The center has also identified legal and enforcement strategies – working with law enforcement and the courts – to better protect women imperiled by domestic abuse.

Dubus' work is motivated and informed by personal experience.

The Bradford College graduate was married in her 20s to a physically and



**Suzanne Dubus is the executive director of the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center, named after a dedicated volunteer whose portrait, above left, hangs in the Newburyport office. On the opposite page, a crowd came out for the organization's 34th annual Walk Against Domestic Violence at Waterfront Park in October. This year's event raised more than \$100,000.**

emotionally abusive man in California, having to flee the relationship.

She returned to Massachusetts, first working as a paralegal, then volunteering at what was then the Women's Crisis Center of Greater Newburyport.

This was in 1995. The center had been founded in 1982 by a committee at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in response to rising cases of domestic violence, including high-profile incidents in Salisbury, Seabrook and Haverhill.

The center was largely hidden from view, an almost clandestine operation where volunteers did what they could to help endangered women and children – providing a listening ear or a couch to sleep on.

Dubus, speaking inside the center's Harris Street location in Newburyport, an ordinary-appearing 2½-story house with a pitched roof, remembers when she started as a volunteer in 1995.

The hush operation was so under wraps

*By* TERRY DATE • *Photos by* KEITH SULLIVAN

# Giving a boost to those who give back

Cummings Foundation grants improve local lives, especially those of low-income women, children and other vulnerable people.

The foundation, funded by Cummings Properties' rental profits, has awarded more than \$1.1 million to Newburyport nonprofits since 2012.

Recipients include three city nonprofits led by women – YWCA Greater Newburyport, Runway for Recovery and Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center.

A less obvious benefit that Cummings grants deliver is clout, the cachet of having been selected by the philanthropic organization, known for its diligent review of typically small, local organizations serving local needs.

## YWCA Greater Newburyport

Cummings Foundation awarded the Newburyport YWCA \$100,000 in 2020, payable in five \$20,000 installments to manage their cases and help families facing homelessness.

“Volunteers were struck by the organization’s well-structured and coordinated array of services offered to people in need in the community, and felt that YWCA had a long, productive record of achieving its goals,” says the foundation’s executive director, Joyce Vyriotes.

The Newburyport YWCA has been operating since 1883. Providing affordable housing has been a priority from the beginning.

In 1890, it bought 13 Market St. and has provided housing there ever since.

Today, it houses income-qualifying tenants in 124 units – with 40 more planned – in Newburyport, Amesbury, Salisbury and Methuen, CEO Kate Slater says.

About 67% of these residents were previously unhoused.

In addition to housing and health and wellness programs, the YWCA provides child care for 60 kids at its Pond Street



Courtesy photos

Swim lessons for preschoolers are among the many programs at YWCA Greater Newburyport.

location and an after-school program at Bresnahan Elementary School.

Slater says that a great benefit of the Cummings grant is that it can be applied to general operating funds.

“More and more, what I am seeing is nonprofits have to come up with something new and different to chase the money,” Slater says.

This makes it hard for nonprofits, like the YWCA, that have been doing good work meeting established needs for a long time to develop new and innovative projects to qualify for funding.

“And that’s why I think Cummings is so amazing, because they are one of those organizations that says, ‘We recognize the good work that our grantees are doing and we want them to apply these funds to further that work and we trust their guidance in that respect,’” Slater says.

Slater, who started working at the

YWCA in August, graduated from Skidmore College in 2008 with degrees in English and theater and a minor in music. She has a master’s degree in higher education from Northeastern University and a Ph.D. in educational policy and leadership from the University of New Hampshire.

She has worked for education nonprofits, including the Institute for Recruitment of Teachers at Philips Academy in Andover. That work furthered her understanding of how system-embedded racism throws up barriers.

Still, while the work was in keeping with the social justice aims she supports, she didn’t get to see the benefits in an up-close-and-personal way.

She is glad to now be working directly with people on behalf of principles she believes in.

“We see all of the things that we do,” she says.

that a knock at the door could be unnerving to the volunteers within.

## A place to turn

The Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center has now grown in visibility and reach with four offices. Two in Lawrence, one in Amesbury and one in Newburyport. It offers an array of services.

“So it’s not just a hotline and a couch,” Dubus says.

The center still has hotline services but also short-term crisis intervention services.

“Say your kids have witnessed a terrible fight last night,” she says. “They will bring their kids in. We have child advocates and child therapists who will work with kids.”

The center has legal services, a staff attorney, an art therapist and a rental subsidy program to try to keep women in their homes.

These are providing affordable housing and affordable child care and working for social justice and health and wellness.

All in service of the larger mission to eliminate racism and empower women.

Slater says that coming to the YWCA is a dream come true for her and she's excited to go to work every day.

## Runway for Recovery

Runway for Recovery helps families affected by breast cancer.

It helps them meet everyday needs and more with grants for housing, food, medical expenses, heating, counseling and summer camp.

The relief helps families focus on treatment, recovery or grieving.

Runway, which is based on Water Street in Newburyport, has expanded its reach to helping hundreds of families throughout New England and in Southern California, with grants totaling \$3.1 million since its founding.

In 2022, Cummings Foundation awarded the nonprofit \$100,000, payable in four \$25,000 installments.

"Our volunteer reviewers were impressed with how the organization had grown (from \$84,000 in revenue in 2019 to more than \$500,000 in 2022), as well as by its specific focus on providing families with a continuum of support along their breast cancer journey, including after a loss," Vyriotes says.

In effect, Runway's success, helping families beyond the region, has outgrown the Cummings' grant program's eligibility requirement – that the services be very local.

Olivia Achtmeyer Boger founded Runway in 2007, six years after her mom, Candace Achtmeyer, died from breast cancer.

"I was looking to do something in her honor," Boger says.

She would hold a single fashion show – she thought – in memory of her mom.

January 2026 marks 20 years of runway extravaganzas.

The first fashion show had 10 models



**Crystal Davis, a breast cancer survivor and member of the Runway for Recovery board of directors, walks in the October 2022 fashion show in Boston.**

and 75 people at the Nashawtuc Country Club in Concord.

The most recent Runway fashion show, at The Westin Boston Seaport District, had 120 models and 1,000 guests.

The first 13 years were primarily put together by Boger. She donated all the money raised to Dr. Jack Erban's work in cancer care. Erban, who had provided care for her mother, was diagnosed with brain cancer in 2019 and died in 2020.

At this time, Boger left her 15-year teaching career to dedicate herself to the organization.

"My sister and a dear friend of mine said, 'I think you should do this full time and really create events throughout the year for the models and for fundraising opportunities,'" Boger says.

She knew firsthand the tribulations that families face when breast cancer strikes and enlarged the scale of her nonprofit while maintaining the scope, raising money for local families with specific needs.

Boger moved Runway to a direct-grant model, giving help to applicants.

She grew the organization's staff and expanded the areas it serves.

Runway shows are the nonprofit's signature events.

The people who walk at shows have been affected by breast cancer.

Some of them are BRCA positive, meaning they have a significantly higher lifetime risk of breast cancer.

Some are currently in treatment.

Some have completed treatment and are in remission.

Some are living with metastatic breast cancer.

Some are walking in memory of a loved one who has died from breast cancer.

"Many people choose to have their kids walk with them because their kids have seen them go through it and been a part of their story," Boger says.

The Cummings Foundation grant has boosted Runway's growth in another way.

"It has inspired other donors and other foundations to grant us money," Boger says.

– Terry Date

"We made a decision many, many years ago that we didn't want to be in the business of removing women from their community, from their jobs – the kids from the schools," she says. "We wanted to try to keep them safely in their own homes. It was a lot easier to keep them there and help them stay there than it was for them to be on the run."

A homicide prevention program, the Domestic Violence High Risk Team, was forged out of a 2002 tragedy.

Crisis center client Dorothy Giunta-Cotter, of Amesbury, was murdered by her husband despite widespread knowledge of the danger she faced.

The center adopted a multiagency approach based on Johns Hopkins University research into assessing risk.

The center worked with the courts and police and introduced new practices in Newburyport District Court, including dangerousness assessments in domestic violence cases and holding

# 'Great love for the work' keeps volunteer going

More than 100 volunteers are the engines that drive the Cummings Foundation's annual grant awards.

They review applications, make site visits and help select recipients, staying engaged with them as they carry out their missions.

Jim Kraus, a retired fundraiser whose last job was executive director of development at Boston's Museum of Science, has been volunteering for eight years. He is on the Site Visits Committee and mentors small nonprofits through the Cummings Coaches program.

He graduated in 1971 from St. Michael's College in Vermont with a political science degree. He then spent four years in the U.S. Air Force in the intelligence division before getting a master's degree from George Washington University in higher education administration.

Kraus went to work raising money for colleges and then for hospitals in New England and spent his last 11 years raising money for the Museum of Science.

He met Bill and Joyce Cummings, who established the Cummings Foundation in 1986, during a \$280 million capital campaign for new exhibit spaces.

He recalls the foundation awarding



**Jim Kraus has been volunteering for the Cummings Foundation since 2018.**

the museum \$3 million.

"I think we asked them for \$5 million and they gave us \$3 million," Kraus says.

Kraus started volunteering for the foundation six months before he retired in 2018.

"I called Bill and I said, 'Hey, I'm going to retire, do you need any help with the foundation?'" Kraus recalls.

When Kraus visits an organization

that has received a previous Cummings grant, he looks for a dynamic operation where the nonprofit is continuing to be innovative and on the move.

So what keeps him engaged in his foundation volunteering?

"A great love for the work," he says.

The work is both satisfying and interesting.

He recently visited Neighbors In Need, which operates mobile food pantries at 10 weekly locations across Lawrence, Methuen and Andover and was seeking help paying for an additional truck driver.

"They have a tremendous sense of caring for those that are in need," Kraus says.

He witnessed an odd and wonderful sight in Ipswich on a visit to Mobility Danes of New England, which trains and donates service dogs.

He saw these enormous animals working with veterans coming back from overseas who had lost their mobility or had prosthetic legs and were trying to get used to them.

"I mean there were Great Danes all over, all over the place," Kraus says. "I was like, 'Wow, this is amazing.'"

— Terry Date

offenders more accountable.

Judges began treating the situations like criminal cases and not family matters, Dubus says.

"So we were able to hold the offenders more accountable for the abuse that had already been happening for years and years and years, while we as a community could gather the resources needed to keep her and her children safe," the director says.

It led to changes in how restraining orders are considered and improved police reporting and collection of evidence.

"Before this work started, we had eight domestic violence homicides in a 10-year period, and since then, we've had none," Dubus says.

## Education and support

In 2005, the Women's Crisis Center of Greater Newburyport was renamed the

Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center.

Jeanne Geiger was a developer and dedicated volunteer whose husband and son donated \$1 million to the center after she died from a fall.

The crisis center also has a program for men who use violence in relationships and a program on teen dating violence.

The center promotes healthy relationships and living to students in local communities, including Amesbury, Haverhill and Lawrence.

The goal is to end unhealthy cycles with this generation.

Dubus says that parents may think their young children are unaware when domestic abuse erupts.

She recalls hearing a mother tell of how her 3-year-old son was already mirroring his father's actions.

The mom said that she told her son, repeatedly, that it was time for him to go to bed.

When she took the television remote from his hand, he lashed out, calling her profane and belittling names that he had



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Fundraising teams posed for photos before the 2025 Walk Against Domestic Violence kicked off this past fall.

heard his dad call her.

The boy grabbed his mother's throat and choked her, like he had seen his father do to her.

"If we can intervene early in the life of a child victim, we can help them develop the resilience skills, we can help them show up ready to learn in school when they start school," Dubus says. "We can help them avoid a world of hurt."

## Shaping the future

The Geiger center offers Girls Inc. training as one of its Youth Empowerment Services programs.

"The mission is to inspire all girls to be strong, smart and bold," Dubus says. "And it's a wonderful way to help girls think about who they are, who they want to be, keep their self-esteem high, keep their confidence high so that they don't fall into that trap of feeling – say if they don't have a boyfriend – that they're worthless."

One of the chapters is at Lawrence Catholic Academy, a prekindergarten-through-eighth-grade school with 543 students.

Eighth graders Leslie Ureña Melo and Liah Pepin Morales are enrolled in a Girls



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Reba Saldanha photo

**Lawrence Catholic Academy Principal Monica Lucey sits with eighth graders Leslie Ureña Melo, left, and Liah Pepin Morales, who are both enrolled in a Girls Inc. leadership program offered by the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center.**

Inc. leadership program.

Often, the Girls Inc. members form circles and talk about their lives, their likes and dreams as they build confidence in themselves and each other, Leslie says.

“I do want to become a brave girl and I want to be really confident,” she says.

Liah shares those goals.

“I want to learn how to be a leader and speak for myself,” she says. “And learn that when others want to turn you down, it’s not their decision.”

Liah came to Lawrence from the Dominican Republic when she was in fifth grade. She spoke no English, and her math and other academic skills were far below those of her classmates.

She was afraid that she would be ridiculed and shunned by classmates.

Girls Inc. helped her gain a footing. Today, her English is outstanding, her academic skills strong, and she has a lot of friends, some of them through the circle learning at Girls Inc.

Principal Monica Lucey says that both Leslie and Liah are school prefects, eighth graders chosen to be role models and school leaders.

They sit with younger kids at school Mass. They help plan events and parties. They volunteer at the book fair and the ice cream social.

“They planned a Valentine’s Day party for the whole school last year,” Lucey says.

The school also has class representatives.

“Last year, all seven of our class representatives were girls who had all been through the Girls Inc. program, which isn’t surprising to me, as their principal, because they’re all strong and confident young women,” Lucey says. 🌟

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