Dear friends, neighbors and community partners,

Here we are in February, and it is a Leap Year, so we get an extra day to enjoy this month. During February, we take time to celebrate Black History to ensure that the rich culture and diverse contributions of the African American community are acknowledged and honored. We are pleased to invite the community to a special “Black in St. Louis: Then & Now” program on Feb. 29th presented by the UMSL African American Alumni Chapter. At this event we will recognize Black History Month while gaining insights into the historical research of St. Louis historians and father-and-son writing team, Dr. John A. Wright, Sr. and Dr. John A. Wright, Jr. Long-time St. Louis media specialist Bonita Cornute will moderate.

In this edition of UMSL Community Connection we are proud to share a few new stories of UMSL alumni, community partnerships and initiatives making a difference in our area. Together we are addressing needs and finding ways to make our community a better place to live and work for everyone!

Gratefully forward,

Kristin Sobolik
Chancellor
University of Missouri–St. Louis
UMSL exceeds St. Louis Anchor Action Network goals for increased hiring, purchasing in 2023

There has been a campus wide commitment to engage local businesses and recruit staff from north St. Louis city and county.

The St. Louis Anchor Action Network was established to help expand opportunity and direct greater resources to parts of the region that have faced decades of disinvestment. Underpinning those efforts is the shared commitment of network members to change the way they do business by being more intentional about contracting with businesses and engaging with residents within a focused geography of 22 ZIP codes, primarily located in north St. Louis city and north St. Louis County.

The University of Missouri–St. Louis has played a leading role in the network, alongside Edward Jones and in alignment with a key pillar of the university’s strategic plan around community engagement and economic development, since its launch in 2021. UMSL helped the network set an ambitious goal to increase purchasing and hiring within those neighborhoods by 10% in the 2023 calendar year. Before December even arrived, the university had exceeded those targets. Units across the UMSL campus spent more than $6.4 million contracting with businesses in the focused geography – up from just over $3.7 million in 2022 – and also employed more than 650 people from those ZIP codes, easily topping the target it set when the year began by nearly 200 employees. Read more.

As director of community wellness for A Red Circle, recent UMSL grad Nikki Engelbrecht helps improve healthy food access in north St. Louis County

Growing up in a rural community in a family without a lot of money, Nikki Engelbrecht was grateful for the local organizations that helped boost her family up. Now, in her new role as director of community wellness for A Red Circle, she’s helping to provide similar resources to families in north St. Louis County. Founded by Erica Williams, A Red Circle is a nonprofit organization dedicated to “providing sustained, focused attention to the racial equity issues that impact north St. Louis County.” The organization focuses on improving access in three core areas: healthy foods, education and the arts.

“When our foundational institutions are embedded with systemic racism, it really hurts community members, especially in North County, where residents are impacted by red-lining practices,” said Engelbrecht, who graduated summa cum laude from the University of Missouri–St. Louis in December. “And...
businesses don’t invest in communities that lack resources.” Engelbrecht, who earned a bachelor’s degree in sociology and a certificate from the Pierre Laclede Honors College, was first connected to A Red Circle through a research project she worked on in a qualitative research class with Advising and Associate Teaching Professor Larry Irons. Immediately drawn to the organization’s mission of providing healthy food access, she started volunteering and then interned with A Red Circle for about a year before being hired full-time. Read more.

Four-time College of Education graduate Howard Fields strives for inclusion and equity in schools

Howard Fields still gets emotional remembering the day he lined up for commencement inside the Mark Twain Athletic Center at the University of Missouri–St. Louis in December 2007. Having completed his associate degree at St. Louis Community College before transferring to UMSL for his bachelor’s degree in physical education, Fields – who grew up in the nearby Cool Valley Apartments – was excited to soon become the first college graduate in his family…. Bolstered by his success in the College of Education, Fields – who also met his wife, Nancy, at UMSL – decided to pursue his master’s in education administration, hoping to land a position as an athletic director. He earned his master’s in 2009 and would go on to receive his EdS degree in 2012 and, later, his PhD in 2017. Read more about Fields' success in different roles in Education and his current work as a speaker and thought leader focusing on inclusion, student performance disparities, diversity and systemic racism.

Friendship, Faith and Futures

The STLMade Movement, an initiative of Greater St. Louis Inc., story by Valerie Schremp Hahn

Pastors Ken and Beverly Jenkins opened community development hub R&R Marketplace in Dellwood with the aim to change lives.

Ken and Beverly Jenkins used to stand in the parking lot of the old shopping plaza in Dellwood, back when it was a shell of its previous self, and pray. The plaza, at 10148 West Florissant Avenue, had been anchored by a Schnucks supermarket and had stood vacant for nearly 20 years. The Jenkineses, both pastors, saw potential in the plaza, in the community, in its
people. “We would talk about changing the narrative,” Ken Jenkins says. “Everybody (in the media and from outside the community) that descends in this area, they only talk about the bad things — the racial struggles, and the unrest, and the disinvestment, which has all happened. But we talk about the possibility, of changing a story.” The couple, who live in Florissant, hosted a grand opening in September at the plaza, a $20 million, nearly 90,000-square-foot development they call R&R Marketplace. It’s owned by their nonprofit, Refuge and Restoration, which started as a transitional home that had helped men who had been incarcerated, unhoused, unemployed, or underemployed.

... The marketplace, they said, isn’t about the shopping center property itself. It’s about transformation. “We get up every day knowing if somebody drives into this lot or walks into this lot, their life is gonna change,” Ken Jenkins says. “And that’s the goal. We find great peace and joy knowing that hey, somebody came out here, and they left a different way.” Read more.

**Sodexo staff at UMSL serve surrounding community through longtime involvement with Meals on Wheels**

As many as 35 area residents receive hot meals prepared by Sodexo staff members each day through the Normandy Meals on Wheels program. The volunteers arrive at the loading dock at the north end of the Millennium Student Center at the University of Missouri–St. Louis around 10 a.m. each morning. There are usually four or five of them, and they gather the biodegradable fiber containers of food waiting for them in the stainless-steel hot box and load them into their cars along with brown paper sacks packed with bread, butter, a milk carton, a dessert or pieces of fruit.

Each volunteer will transport up to eight meals per day to homes around the greater Normandy area as part of the Meals on Wheels of Greater St. Louis program. As many as 35 area residents will receive meals in a given day. Only inclement weather ... or major holidays such as Christmas and New Year’s, interrupts this scene from happening every day – Monday through Friday – throughout the year. It’s been occurring for far more than a decade. Read more.

**Share with Us**

We’d love to hear your questions and comments about UMSL and stories about great things happening in our communities. Your thoughts will help shape content covered in future newsletters to be pertinent to you and your neighbors. Leave any suggestions, questions, or stories here. Thank you!