

## **GARDINER SCHOOLS RECRUITING TEACHERS THROUGH INNOVATIVE HOUSING PROGRAM**

**GARDINER, MONTANA**—The North Yellowstone Education Foundation (NYEF) is working with Gardiner Public Schools (GPS) to address the teachers' shortage and affordable housing issues in Montana. Through the foundation's Teacher Housing Initiative (THI), GPS is recruiting and retaining teachers and staff by offering affordable housing to supplement their wages.

According to Nico Wood Kos, director of NYEF, "It's become nearly impossible to hire and retain good teachers at a starting salary of \$37,500 in a community where a house might cost \$1 million. Even 10 years ago, it was difficult; then the vacation-rental market exploded and altered the fabric of the community."

The foundation, now nearing the end of Phase 1 of the THI, purchased a historic three-story home in 2020 from a community member who sold it well below market value. The mortgage on the building is nearly paid, and the house provides living quarters for several GPS faculty and staff. "In 2023 we will pay off the remaining balance of \$85,000 and continue to fundraise throughout the year," Wood Kos says.

The house was built in 1904 by the owner of Gardiner's original mercantile—with locally sourced river rock, a stone interior, and stone remnants from the Roosevelt Arch, according to Wood Kos. Purchase and renovation of the property has enabled NYEF to preserve an important part of Gardiner's historic past. "I think it's a great success," she says. "We're able to keep the house full, keep the tenants happy, and maintain the property."

NYEF has received strong support from donors. The Park County Community Foundation, George L. Ohrstrom Foundation, Gianforte Family Foundation, and First Interstate Bank and Foundation have provided financial backing. Private donors contributed close to \$400,000 in 2021 as well.

"A lack of affordable housing is the biggest problem facing Gardiner today," says Wood Kos, who is now eyeing property options for Phase 2 of the initiative, with foundation, school, and community partners.

"In a place like Gardiner," she explains, "the school functions as a community anchor, a gathering place, as evidence that this is a home. This is a place with history and roots. It is a nexus of kinship. It is a cornerstone of stability. It is fundamental to our well-being."

For more information or to support Gardiner's Teacher Housing Initiative, contact Wood Kos at 406-529-9414.

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