

# Umbrella's executive director on 'meeting the mission'

By Sahra Ali

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After visiting the Northeast Kingdom a few years ago, Umbrella's Executive Director Amanda Cochran's family knew it was a place they could "live."

She recounted her family's first visit to the area from her office on Railroad Street in St. Johnsbury. There are countless stories like this. People coming to the Northeast Kingdom for a visit and falling in love with the landscape, the slowness, the spirit of the region.

Cochran's visit included Kingdom Trails, the region's renowned mountain bike trail network in East Burke, and First Night North, a New Year's Eve celebration in St. Johnsbury hosted by local arts organization Catamount Arts.

It has been four years since Amanda, her husband John, and their three children, Jonah, Luke, and Ellie relocated to St. Johnsbury. For Amanda, the path to her position at Umbrella was a long time in the making. She beams with excitement ignited by a lifelong passion to serve and provide accessible opportunities to help survivors of domestic and sexual violence lead self-directed lives with sustainable futures.

Umbrella was founded 45 years ago by women who aspired to improve health care for women in the region.

"We thought of starting a women's health center, similar to others in the state, but after visiting them, we decided that was a bit ambitious for us," said Pam Parker, one of the nine founders.

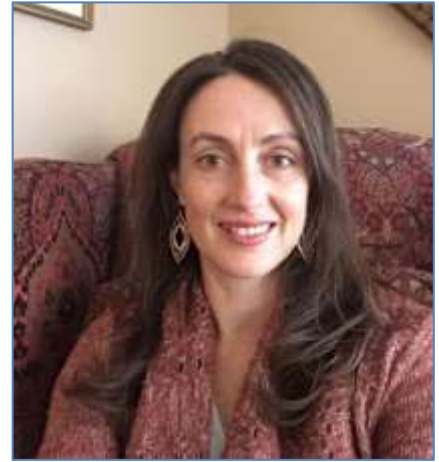
After a community meeting, the idea took shape.

"All kinds of classes and groups came out of that meeting: an auto mechanics group, a group for adoptive mothers, a carpentry group, and many more," said Margie Hoyt, the director of the Planned Parenthood office in St. Johnsbury and one of the founders. Hoyt offered the use of a room at her office and that became a lending library and meeting space. After a suggestion from two women in Glover about adding a rape crisis hotline, a domestic violence program was started and two federally funded employees came on board. Everything took off as volunteers offered their homes to shelter women and children fleeing violence. The board applied for a New Hampshire charitable foundation grant and secured it. The rest is history.

"As a longtime supporter of Umbrella, I have witnessed its growth from a small grassroots agency to an essential and vibrant Northeast Kingdom multi-service organization," says Susan Gresser, chair of the board of directors. "Its mission and programs currently address the broader needs of our community such as empowerment in the face of poverty, the need for safety, food and housing; and prevention education against gender-based violence. I am very grateful to be Chair of this thriving and compassionate organization."

## Introduction to the nonprofit arena

Cochran is originally from Arlington, Mass., a suburb of Boston. After graduating from Colby College in Maine, she moved to Escondido, Calif., to work as an AmeriCorp volunteer with an afterschool program. There, she met her husband John, an Escondido native preparing for medical school. John eventually settled on Dartmouth College and Amanda made her way back to New England. Her first job was with WISE, an organization like Umbrella, located in Vermont's Upper Valley. WISE is an organization focused on alleviating gender-based violence through advocacy, education, and various programs. Amanda began



Umbrella Executive Director  
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as an advocate before settling into outreach and education, a role she filled from 2002-2006 while John was in medical school.

Around 2006, John was preparing to do his residency, and Amanda wanted to pursue a graduate degree in Nonprofit and Organizational Management at the Heller School of Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass.

"I had always known I would go into nonprofit and social justice whether it was with children, families, or youth," Amanda recalls. In her eight years in Lawrence, Amanda would get to work in all three areas. After grad school, she took a job with Home for Little Wanderers in Boston, a 200-year-old child and family organization that caters to all stages of family and child development. During her time as associate director of foundation relations, Amanda wrote grants and worked on capital campaigns.

"It was a fully-immersive administrative role that allowed me to partake in the inner workings of a large organization and develop best practices," Amanda said. "I learned a lot."

Before long, Amanda yearned to be closer to the mission. She wanted to be on the ground talking to folks and doing outreach. By this time, she had two children and was working part-time while she cared for them. Amanda saw a need in Lawrence.

"I wanted to apply my knowledge to a smaller organization that was grassroots," she said. "I noticed the local chapter of Groundwork USA, was doing tremendous work and [I] started there." Groundwork Lawrence, as it was called then, focused on environmental and open space improvements in communities, along with youth education, access to healthy food, and employment opportunities.

The mission was exciting, and it involved connecting with youth. Most of all, it was close to home. Amanda discovered Groundwork Lawrence did not have a director of development and she pitched the job to them.

"Funding is a very important part of a nonprofit, especially if you wish to grow and become sustainable," she said. She spent six years there on a part-time schedule.

## **Umbrella, the arts, and coming to St. Johnsbury**

In 2016, after 10 years in Lawrence and three kids, Amanda and John wanted to head back to the Upper Valley. While searching for jobs in the healthcare sector, they remembered visiting the Northeast Kingdom. While there were other options in Randolph and Littleton, N.H., they were taken by the idea of their children attending St. Johnsbury Academy. At the time, Amanda was working remotely for Groundwork Lawrence. Serendipitously, John, now a family medicine physician, was recruited by Northern Counties Health Care. Upon relocation to St. Johnsbury, Amanda contacted Catamounts Arts to see if she could be involved. Her first encounter with the organization at First Night North had left a lasting impression and though there wasn't a job available, she joined the board of directors.

"[Amanda's] leadership has been critical to Catamount's success where she has served in multiple officer roles including as our past president," said Catamount Arts executive director Jody Fried.

Amanda joined Umbrella in 2018 after applying for the vacant executive director position. She feels she has inherited a well-managed organization and is excited about the future, she said. The organization is focusing on revving up prevention efforts for gender-based violence. Recently, the organization secured funding from the Violence Against Women Act to add two additional emergency shelter units in St. Johnsbury and Newport. In 2019, there was additional funding granted to provide transitional housing for female-identifying persons impacted by domestic or sexual violence who need help with rent.

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Throughout the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, Umbrella's Cornucopia program has helped women transitioning from unsafe living conditions gain needed vital support in developing marketable employment skills. The women prepare and package food for Meals on Wheels.

"I know that with the [changes] in the economy, the trainees are no longer there, and yet, Cornucopia and Umbrella have not abandoned the home-delivered meals program," said Karen Budde, RSVP Volunteer Coordinator. "This program still makes and distributes about 600 meals a week!"

The success of Umbrella is indicative of the people of this region. The mission of taking care of the community and being of service in rural areas does not fall on deaf ears. There are many obstacles faced by those vulnerable in the Northeast Kingdom, however, there is a vibrant and socially conscious community that is also present. This community does not follow a single model; it is not fixed. It ebbs and flows, weaving in and out and showing us that there is still resilience and flexibility in the face of uncertainty.

Amanda recognized this from the start.

"There is an opportunity for people who want to make an opportunity here," she said.

Those who wish to take initiative can thrive and build something here that is fruitful and sustainable for a whole community. This is apparent now, more than ever.



A student in the "Youth in Power Program" selling Umbrella's gelato with a mission.