

## Efforts helping make Fort Collins world class for all

*Filed Under Opinions Soapboxes*  
*Feb. 12*

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A poignant comment that has stuck with me is one that emerged from a conversation with City Manager Darin Atteberry as we were discussing the region being recognized over the years as world class. Atteberry said he had been examining if we are “world class for all” and if every citizen has the opportunity to experience all that our community has to offer.

To be a world-class region, a critical component is economic vitality. Concern over regional poverty numbers and having ample skilled residents of working age has resulted in the need to bring the economic and social sectors together.

A year ago, our community started down a path to bridge and challenge community sectors to rethink our basic assumptions about poverty and explore new strategies to affect change through two complementary pilot initiatives: Bridges out of Poverty Northern Colorado and Circles Larimer County. The goal was to bring these nationally recognized poverty alleviation models to our community because we believed they could have a significant impact here.

Our approach was three-fold: provide our community with a shared framework for understanding poverty and economic diversity; build greater capacity for local nonprofits and businesses to help low-income families succeed in life and on the job; and cultivate a community committed to change.

We knew Larimer County could provide an important testing ground for Bridges and Circles because of the community’s track record for working collaboratively across sectors to address major policy issues and its commitment to build a healthy, sustainable community. Larimer County, true to form, embraced the chance to make a difference, and we are beginning to see the outcomes we expected.

Dozens of local nonprofits and businesses and more than 2,000 community members staked a claim in the initiatives in 2012 through their advocacy, registration for Bridges trainings and Circles classes, and volunteerism. More than 1,300 community members attended free Bridges trainings conducted either by local certified trainers or national experts on poverty alleviation, including a Bridges for Business session that drew managers and human resource professionals from more than 40 local businesses.

We also partnered with Columbine Health Systems and the Larimer County Workforce Center to develop an on-site Bridges navigator program to increase employee well-being and retention. The navigator conducts confidential sessions with Columbine Health employees to address barriers to sustained employment by helping formulate problem-solving plans and connections to community resources. In 2013, Bohemian Foundation and the Fort Collins Area Chamber of Commerce will explore the feasibility of a cost-sharing navigator program for small and mid-sized businesses.

I invite you to help us grow these initiatives locally. Contact Valerie Wendell at Bohemian Foundation if you would like to receive free, on-site Bridges training for your organization or to learn more about the navigator program. If you received Bridges training in 2012, please go to [BridgesNoCo.org](http://BridgesNoCo.org) to sign up for advanced training. Visit [ELTCenter.org/Circles](http://ELTCenter.org/Circles) to learn more about Circles and how to become an ally for a family trying to lift itself out of poverty.

As the first year of the pilot initiatives winds down, we would like to say thank you, Larimer County, for rethinking business as usual when it comes to addressing poverty. We need to keep the momentum going and move onward to ensure we are “world class for all.”

Sarah Hach is the outgoing director of community programs for Bohemian Foundation. She and her family are relocating to the Portland, Maine, area at the end of the year.