

Christy Brown and her friend Prince Charles have worked together to support organizations such as the Sustainable Food Alliance, the Global Alliance for the Future of Food, and the Harmony in Education program, part of The Harmony Project.



Force of Nature

IN MARCH, VERY EARLY IN KENTUCKY'S EXPERIENCE of the pandemic, Louisville resident and international philanthropist Christy Brown was diagnosed with COVID-19.

"Of course, you really have no idea when you're quote 'diagnosed' with it what that means," she told the Brunswick Review in a recent interview. "Actually, at my age, that could very likely mean death. And oh, my gosh. Well, are you ready for that journey? So, you go through lots of very different kinds of emotions, plus the physical part."

As it happens, issues of health have long been of paramount concern to Mrs. Brown—not just physical health, but a balance of all forms of health, including spiritual, cultural, psychological, intellectual,

CHRISTY BROWN, widow of the late CEO of family-run Brown Forman, wants to change the world through an emphasis on health. Brunswick's CARLTON WILKINSON reports.

financial and environmental. Her own long but successful recovery from the novel coronavirus infection only served to affirm a mission that has driven her life and her work as a philanthropist to make health the pivotal foundation for societal progress.

The guiding principles of that mission are represented in a model of her own design which she calls "The Circle of Health and Harmony." Similar to Maslow's pyramid-shaped hierarchy of needs, this simple diagram places environmental health at the core of all concerns, and serves as a guide for all decisions large and small, on everything from global threats to personal challenges.

On web pages, emails, business cards, pins, posters and publications, she distributes the diagram to

royalty, ambassadors, CEOs, workman—anyone she comes in contact with. It is the foundational principle for two research bodies she helped create: the Center for Healthy Air, Water and Soil, which she co-founded with Dr. Ted Smith in 2013, and the Envirome Institute, founded in 2018. Both are now part of the University of Louisville.

“I think of the circle as a tool, a reflection of my life, a reflection of all of our lives,” she says. “I happen to be the person to put it together this way.”

In recent months, as Mrs. Brown was implementing the design on a personal level under quarantine recovering from the virus, it was also driving her work in the community. Through the Envirome Institute, she has helped to build a collaboration with various organizations exploring new areas of COVID-19 testing. The Co-Immunity Project brings together municipal facilities, health centers, the University of Louisville, businesses and other organizations to collect more accurate data on the spread of the virus and the health of the community under siege.

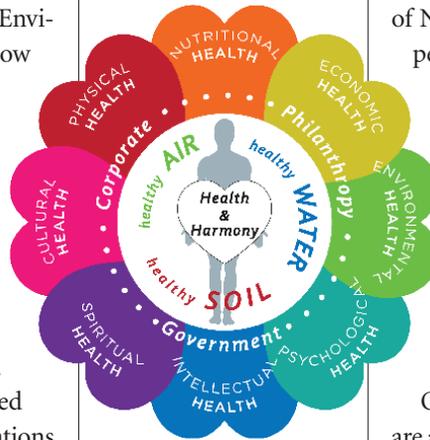
The circle diagram even helps to frame her response to ongoing social challenges, including the painful reckoning roiling her city following the killings of George Floyd in Minnesota and Louisville resident Breonna Taylor at the hands of police.

GODMOTHER OF KENTUCKY

Louisville is a town of contradictions. Known for bourbon and horses, Antebellum plantations and paddlewheel riverboats, it is also a modern city, with a contemporary skyline and some of the South’s best cultural offerings and restaurants. The legacy of slavery still haunts the community, yet it is today a politically liberal district in a conservative state.

Mrs. Brown is herself something of a contradiction. On the one hand, she is an old-fashioned southern socialite who in past years would turn out for the Kentucky Derby in the most eye-catching of fanciful hats. On the other, she is a restless, dynamic visionary, intent not on tradition for tradition’s sake, but on building the future as an expression of the best that humanity can achieve.

Her charitable work has won many admirers. The state branch of the Nature Conservancy dubbed her “Godmother of Kentucky.” A key supporter on the international scene is the heir to the royal throne in the UK, Prince Charles, a leading voice on issues of sustainability and the author of the book *Harmony*. The two are kindred spirits, encouraging one another in a campaign to create a culture of balance in the



“The Circle of Harmony and Health” is the foundational symbol of Mrs. Brown’s approach, positioning all of the work of society in relation to the core value of health.

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world. In 2015, Prince Charles came to Louisville at her invitation and addressed an audience there.

“Christy Brown, if I may say so, is one of the most remarkable people I have come across; a true force of Nature, with an unbounded enthusiasm to bring people together across a whole range of important issues, and with the determined tenacity to make things happen,” the Prince said.

A native of Maryland, Mrs. Brown moved to Kentucky when she married Owsley Brown II, a member of the family behind the historic Brown Forman liquor company. Mr. Brown rose to become the company’s chief executive and grew the firm as an international concern. Jack Daniel’s, Finlandia Vodka, Old Forester, Woodford Reserve and Herradura are all brands under the Brown Forman roof.

Christy and Owsley shared a love of community service and worked closely together, becoming well known in Louisville for revitalizing the downtown and contributions to the arts. Her husband’s unexpected death in 2011 left her grief-stricken but, if anything, more motivated.

“That was a huge wakeup call,” she says of her husband’s passing. In the years afterward, she found a new sense of purpose and resolve, channeling her energy into a full schedule of philanthropy and focusing her ideas for social reforming, grounded in the Circle of Health and Harmony.

“We’re all made up of these various forms of health—we, ourselves, individually, then our families, our communities, our corporations. Our job is to figure out how to grow each of these forms of health and create balance.”

CO-IMMUNITY PROJECT

The pandemic put that desire to foster health and balance to the test. In the Spring of this year, frustrated by the shutdown and the threat to the public health threat, she helped launch the Co-Immunity Project, a joint endeavor of the University of Louisville, the university’s Envirome Institute, the Louisville Healthcare CEO Council, Norton Healthcare and several other institutions and organizations.

“We can’t just sit here and do nothing,” she said. “All the smart people were saying, ‘We need testing. And we need different kinds of testing.’ But when we started, we really didn’t know we were going to end up focusing on testing. We just knew we had to help.”

The Co-Immunity Project began on several different fronts, including testing frontline healthcare workers, which provided data to researchers that is proving valuable in assessments of community risk.

In addition, the project led Louisville to become one of the first cities to begin actively tracking the virus in wastewater, in cooperation with the local sewage authority. From the levels of the virus in wastewater, researchers can anticipate outbreak trends weeks before they become apparent through patient test results. In cooperation with other communities around the country, the city's wastewater testing was under way two months before the start of a program by the national Center for Disease Control in August.

Co-Immunity tapped into the central goal of Mrs. Brown's philanthropic work: to improve health through engagement with the environment, viewing our relationship with the environment as reciprocal. Studying that relationship was the goal of earlier Envirome Institute programs, including the Green Heart Project, which looked at links between environment and heart disease.

"We wanted Louisville to be an urban laboratory, to take the circle and get it ingrained in the functionality of the university, in the functionality of the local government, and then hopefully beyond," she said. "In order to do that, we first launched the Green Heart Project, which meant you have to build new kinds of partnerships. So that's what began to happen with the pandemic: us deciding to come together to look for solutions for our community."

BLACK LIVES MATTER

In recent months, the Louisville community has become a flashpoint for Black Lives Matter protests after a Black Louisville woman was shot and killed in her home as police were serving a no-knock search warrant. As demonstrators poured into the streets in July, Mrs. Brown published an impassioned op-ed in the Louisville Courier Journal, calling for "profound validation for profound pain."

"The shooting of Breonna Taylor has made even clearer the extreme undervaluing of human life and human dignity of our Black community that in truth is its own horrid and multi-generational pandemic," Mrs. Brown wrote. She is a supporter of "A Path Forward for Louisville," a document signed by dozens of local Black leaders that calls for specific actions by the city. While a number of police reforms were included as part of the family's wrongful-death lawsuit settlement, "A Path Forward for Louisville" goes further, seeking many additional police and community reforms.

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PRINCE CHARLES



Demonstrators in Louisville call for justice in the wake of the killing of Breonna Taylor. The 26-year-old medical worker was killed in her apartment in March during a raid by police.

"A Path Forward is a blueprint," Mrs. Brown said. "And it has almost all forms of health that I've talked about—mental health in particular. It's not explicitly using the words that I use. But it's certainly covering it. It's like heaven to hear people talking about psychological health. Even before this document was created, we've been very, very concerned about the psychological health of our community."

Mrs. Brown has found herself in agreement with the protesters, who look beyond mistreatment at the hands of police to the many ways the Black community has been disadvantaged.

"There is a faction within our community that is spreading untruths about the demonstrators. They're being maligned in ways that are really destructive. The vast majority are good, safe people who just want to talk about these injustices. And what they were saying is, our financial health has not been tended to. Our nutritional health, our psychological health. I mean, they were going right around the circle, with all the things they were saying.

"But really, the thing I have had to learn is to listen. I have a lot of friends who are leaders in the Black community. And I would call them up and suggest something. And a couple of them were very forthright in saying, 'That's your way of doing it. But right now, you just need to listen.' That was tough to hear and tough to do. That's the exercise I'm still going through. And I think the rest of my life I'll try to learn to do it better and better."

INDIVIDUALS TO INSTITUTIONS

For Christy Brown, personal experience has often served as a source of inspiration for her work, first and foremost as a mother of three children, and a grandmother of nine.

"With the little ones, when they're trying to walk, you really just wanna grab them and hold them forever. You don't want to let them fall. But you also want them to walk—so you empower them. You want to give them the confidence to go ahead and walk." The simple insight cascades into all aspects of life and society, building empowerment at all turns.

In her own childhood, she attended school in a Catholic convent where she was exposed to the cloistered nuns' devotion to simplicity and sacrifice. That early experience also planted a seed in her that has blossomed into seeing service to others as her life's purpose and ultimately led her to cofound the Center for Interfaith Relations and the

Louisville Festival of Faiths, the first of its kind in the nation and now in its 25th year.

“There they were, their whole lives dedicated to raising you, the students,” Mrs. Brown recalls. “That’s a really pretty amazing role model. I didn’t appreciate it at the time, of course, but I did later. That’s what we need, right now: unselfish, caring, loving role models.”

From 1997 to 2007, she owned and operated her own business—Louisville Stoneware, a company founded in 1815 that created its products out of local clay millions of years old. That experience, she says, caused her to think deeply about the responsibilities of a business to its community.

“After 9/11, for instance, what was I supposed to do with my employees? Just go on like business as usual?” she says. So instead, she brought in counselors and launched expressive projects to channel their emotional responses to the event. “I learned that if I actually was going to be a steward of this small historic stoneware-manufacturing company, I had to take care of these employees and all that that means.”

It was around that time that Mrs. Brown began to conceive the idea of the Circle of Health and Harmony, seeing health as the central concern that should inform all decisions.

In its simplest form, the design serves as a prompt for personal decision making: How early to arrive at the airport, what to eat, what clothes to wear, how to treat people or schedule time in the week—the answer should promote health in ourselves, our immediate circle, the wider community and ultimately the environment.

The Center for Healthy Air, Water, and Soil, now part of the University of Louisville, encourages citizen scientists to research the connections between human health and the health of the environment, including in area schools. In 2018, she gave a \$5 million gift to the university to establish the Envirome Institute, housed in the university’s medical school. It’s founding director, Dr. Aruni Bhatnagar, is a pioneer in the field of environmental cardiology.

Health-based decisions are able to percolate through all of our institutions via the innate goodness of the average person, Mrs. Brown says. “That is probably the best model we have. When you look at the goodness of communities, sharing and caring are contagious.”

Nonprofit organizations, which are fueled by the devotion of individuals and have longevity based on the importance of their work in the lives of the community, are evidence of this power, she says.



Christy Brown sports a hat made of recycled plastic bags at the Kentucky Derby in 2016. The hat was made by the late Zephyr Mae Miller, a beloved Louisville artist who died in 2014. Mrs. Brown owns a collection of her creations.

CARLTON WILKINSON is a Director in Brunswick’s New York office and the Managing Editor of the Brunswick Review.

“The not-for-profits of the world are, to me, the hearts and the souls of our respective communities—the good ones are completely bipartisan, not driven by economic class, completely democratic and egalitarian. They have jobs, volunteer jobs, for everybody. From licking envelopes or sweeping the auditorium all the way up to those who can give hundreds of thousands of dollars and speak directly to the people in Congress. You’ve got the whole spectrum, potentially the whole community represented.”

The challenge for corporations, the drivers of finance and wealth in our society, is to similarly see themselves as partners with that kind of concern and devotion to the health of society, she says, rather than as generators of wealth for a few.

“Corporations, when they’re doing their job really well, are keeping all of these forms of health in balance—not being driven entirely by finance in isolation. There’s growing awareness of that now, I think. Which is a good thing. But we have a long way to go.”

“One of the things I’ve worked on with Prince Charles and Patrick Holden [Founding Director and Chief Executive of the Sustainable Food Trust] and some other great leaders, was starting a rich conversation on ‘true cost accounting.’ What does it really cost to produce this pin? What is the true cost of a chicken?”

In the absence of such important questions, trust in big business has fallen dramatically.

“There is a rising dislike—and it’s turning into intense anger—against corporate America. And I say that as a person who believes strongly in the importance of corporations. I think of corporations, as being communities within communities. I believe in them, passionately.

“If our corporations don’t figure out where they’re out of whack and decide that they are going to be solution-makers together with their shareholders, their employees, the community, then we’re going to have some problems that are going to be much harder to solve.

“So the answers are potentially in the hands of obviously the corporate leaders, but also, in the hands of shareholders themselves. I believe that when shareholders are properly apprised of, and understand deeply enough, all aspects of their corporate responsibility—that is, that there are all these forms of health that they’re responsible for—then things will begin to change. When they begin to ask of each decision: Is this decision being made through the lens of health?” ♦