"Look at how a single candle can both defy and define the darkness."

- Anne Frank
WOW! What a year it has been for the world, and for Spark in the Dark!

2020 was filled with trial and tribulation as we all worked to find a new normal and many people had their lives flipped upside down, in need for the first time and unsure of where to turn. While others found themselves hopeless as the fragile balance of their situations was thrown into chaos causing a spiral of events that left them needing more than ever.

There have been many times since I launched Spark in the Dark in 2015 that I have been overwhelmed with gratitude for our incredible community and awe-inspired by the generosity of others. This year, however, is the most thankful I have ever been – we were able to offer connection, community, and a light to conquer the darkness that felt like it would never end alongside our members. We were able to launch two new Spark groups and to reach new communities in need of hope and help. We were able to help restore our community’s faith in humanity as we all rejoiced in a record-breaking number of needs met and new members joining the group to help and be helped.

To each one of our members, volunteers, donors, and staff – THANK YOU today and every day for sharing in my vision of making sure that everybody has somebody in their time of need and making that vision a reality. While I may be the original Spark, each of you are the reason that it burns brighter than ever.

Abagail K. McKiernan
President/Executive Director
Using the popular social media platform Facebook, Spark helps connect community members with urgent needs with neighbors who can help them. This includes everything from baby food and clothes, to vehicle repairs, to employment opportunities.

Members across Northern Michigan post a need on the group’s page, and watch others in the community comment back, eager to help. The rules: be civil, offer only free items or resources, take only what you need, and if you can, pay it forward.

The model quickly gained traction. Since launching in 2015, we’ve grown to nearly 17,000 members across multiple groups. We’ve seen our communities work together to help one another with physical and emotional needs, and advice.

Spark in the Dark is redefining what it means to be a successful nonprofit by connecting people in need directly with neighbors who are able to help.

As the first of our kind, we are changing the nonprofit sector by using technology and social media to turn online conversations into offline communities.

We do not turn people away who have unusual or difficult cases, who are feeling hopeless and forgotten; we walk alongside them and connect them into a community of tens of thousands of locals who have the resources to help get them thrive.

We hope you’ll join us!
Thanks to the generous support of our partners at Facebook and the North American Community Accelerator, we were able to launch two new Michigan Spark groups in 2020. These groups are helping us deepen our understanding of how we can spread even further!

**Manistee, Michigan**

This group covers a 40 mile radius of Manistee, MI

Rose, Lead Manistee Admin: "Spark Manistee quickly grew to over 1,000 members in just a few months. Spark’s culture of kindness and connecting resources to needs has led to such a positive ripple effect throughout the area, far beyond just our members. A partner agency was thrilled when a Spark post resulted in the tripling of their monthly outreach. And we’ve only just begun!"

**Mt. Pleasant, Michigan**

This group covers a 45 mile radius of Mt. Pleasant, MI

Gina, Lead Mt. Pleasant Admin: “Spark in the Dark has had an irrefutable effect on the Mt. Pleasant area. The connections that have been made to help so many in need is truly a flame to behold. There is always comfort in receiving necessities, but nothing compares to the relationships built allowing everyone to know we all matter and we all deserve help.”

**Traverse City, Michigan**

This group covers a 45 mile radius of Traverse City, MI

The original Spark group, and our test kitchen for new community collaborations and innovative ways to connect our members with the resources they need continues to grow. In 2020 we saw our highest member engagement rate of all time, as our membership soared!
2020 was SPARK's most active year to date. Our team of volunteer moderators read and monitored over 150,000 comments last year alone.

SPARK continues to grow, attracting new members in the communities we serve, nearly 9 out of 10 of whom remain active.

Four-fifths of all needs expressed on SPARK's facebook group are addressed, most within the first 24 hours. All while utilizing one paid staff member and a team of volunteer admins.
This June, Spark was selected out of thousands of applicants worldwide as one of only 77 organizations (one of 14 in North America) to participate in the elite Facebook Community Accelerator designed to help strengthen and grow communities who are making incredible impact in their area.

Along with guidance, connectivity, and fiscal support, the exciting program allowed Spark to quickly expand to new communities in Mount Pleasant and Manistee County.

Spark was selected as one of four organizations in the North America Cohort to receive additional funding to continue our mission of creating resilient and connected communities. The funding will be used to start two more Spark groups in 2021.

It is an honor to be recognized by the Western Michigan Better Business Bureau for the good and hard work that not only our team, but our community members do every single day.

Spark is an unusually young organization to receive this award. And because of our unique structure, it wasn’t just our team that won it - it was truly a community effort.

Anyone can see everything our members do, not just what our staff and volunteers do. It was actually the Spark members showing and exuding kindness, ethics, and giving that translated into our organization being those things - but each of them makes up a part of the culture.

Every year around Thanksgiving, Spark members come together and match up with members who do not have a warm and generously prepared holiday meal.

Traditionally these members have unique dietary restrictions or are unable to get to the brick and mortar nonprofits in their area to pick up a meal. This makes what should be a joyous Thanksgiving a stressful and oftentimes hopeless holiday.

This year the newly launched, community-driven Restoration Church partnered with Spark by purchasing and delivering meals alongside our members - doubling our usual impact and helping us feed 487 community members in need!
One of the most exciting new programs Spark created in 2020 was the Auto Repair Fund, in partnership with our close partner Bill Marsh Auto Group.

This program helps connect community members in desperate need of vehicle repairs with support and service from Bill Marsh.

Vehicle challenges are one of the most frequently expressed needs we hear at Spark. Without reliable transportation, our community members can struggle to secure employment and meet other commitments.

Thanks to Bill Marsh, we're now able to help more people meet this basic need!

**Jason's Story**

I recently moved back to my hometown Traverse City from Lansing for a new start and a career change. However Covid hit and derailed all my hopes and dreams of starting anew. I was working landscape jobs wherever I could, but I was in financial trouble and very discouraged. Then to top it all off my car’s transmission broke.

I was referred to Spark by a neighbor. I explained how not having a vehicle was effecting my work ethic and how I was dropping the ball on my fatherly duties by reliably getting my children to school functions, practice, dr. appointments, etc.

They helped me connect with a single mother, named Ashley, who was in a similar situation. After taking her broken vehicle into Bill Marsh through the Spark program she find out the repairs were more than she could manage. But then she was gifted a good working vehicle.

Between my savings, Bill Marsh and Spark, we were able to fix up Ashley’s car and make it safe for my family.

I can’t express how much that has given me, I’ve started building a better life for my family one day at a time! I just can’t express my appreciation and gratitude enough!

**Ashley's Story**

I cannot begin to express my gratitude to Bill Marsh and Spark. I recently purchased a vehicle which seemed fine at first but not even a month later the brakes went out. Someone on Spark told me about their partnership with Bill Marsh to help people.

They agreed to have my car looked at by their team. What I thought was only a brake issue turned out to be so much more. All the repairs, even with the help of Bill Marsh, would cost more than we could afford. This was devastating news to receive.

I didn’t know how I was going to get back and forth to work and get my son to his babysitters. Among all the other little things that we use our car for…such as doctor appointments and trips to the grocery store.

But then a miracle happened. Spark reached out to me and told me that a local church – Restoration Church - in Traverse City had a vehicle that they would like to donate to me.

I couldn’t believe it; I still can’t believe it to be honest. Upon receiving the vehicle, I was able to meet the family that donated it to us. I couldn’t thank them enough. One day you feel hopeless and worried and then the next day you feel so blessed and are filled with such gratitude. Thank you sooo much!
MEMBER THANKS & TESTIMONIALS

I am very thankful for this group!
I moved to Traverse four years ago after my divorce. Starting over wasn’t easy. When I moved into my own place, Spark folks helped me furnish it for me and my kids. This group means a lot to me.
This group now gives me a platform to give back to my community. Thank you everyone!

- Melissa

I am so thankful to have been introduced to Spark In The Dark

Through our business, T-shirt Robot my wife and I have donated over 50 hoodies to wonderful people in need during cold times.
Spark gave us an outlet to give back to a community that has given us so much. We’ll be forever grateful for that!

- Beau

“I was desperate for a job and struggling to find any leads.
I posted in Spark and within the hour a business owner reached out to me and asked me to come in for an interview - I was employed by the end of the day!
I am so excited to be providing for my family again.
Thank you for connecting us Spark!”

- Josh

I am very thankful for this group!
People show every day how caring and generous they can be! I’m grateful for the help I’ve received. I hope I can help others as well!

- Lynettemary

It warms my heart that this group exists.
The amount of people who are more than willing to help is just so admirable.
I’m originally from Pennsylvania and you’d NEVER see people help like this.
I don’t have names of all who helped our family in our time of need, but we thank you from the bottom of our hearts for everything.

- Kerry

“*This group serves as a reminder: with the constant barrage of media negativity, there are so many people who care about helping others.
And without judgment, knowing that we have all gone through hard times, paying it forward.
Bottom line it makes me feel grateful and appreciative.*

- Kathye

Getting my car fixed means not only seeing my dad, going to work, getting groceries and it may sound corny but keeping my lights on too. It also means I don’t have to practically work 24/7 to cover more repairs.
Being young is hard during this time of Covid to keep up with expenses let alone a new one. But with y’alls help I was given the best gift ever for the holidays.
The impact of such a generous gift has given me several opportunities to help others - The Subie has helped one person pass their drivers test already thanks to quick action in helping me get it repaired.
Thank you again.*

- Edward
We’ve proudly partnered with Tee See Tee and T-shirt Robot to produce a line of do-gooer apparel.

All the proceeds go to Spark to help us keep connecting thousands of needs each year and launching new Spark communities.

Get yours at: sparkinthedark.org/merchandise

Our donors are a collection of wonderful businesses and individuals that help in their own unique way but all share the same desire to build community. If you’re interested in joining our cause or our community we would love to share a cup of coffee and talk about what makes the most sense for everyone.

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**OUR SUPPORTERS**

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“We support Spark because our core values align with theirs. We are both local organizations that believe our community deserve the best, and that means the ability to flourish and thrive.”

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“We support Spark because we’re all in this together, and together we can accomplish amazing things. We proudly stand Spark and their supporters in igniting positive community change.”

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“Supporting Spark allows us to pay it forward to the incredible community that has helped us many times. We live here and care about our neighbors, they are our friends and family.”

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The triple bottom line--also sometimes called TBL or 3BL--is an accounting framework with three parts: social, environmental (or ecological) and financial. Some organizations have adopted the TBL framework to evaluate their performance in a broader perspective to create greater business value.

As 2020 has wrapped up and turned out to be the biggest growth year we have had to date, we hope to bring that same energy and growth into 2021!

We have been tried by fire and come out stronger than before – a testament to our model and our communities across the state who are thriving.

We will spend this year taking all that we learned from our participation in the Facebook Accelerator program and putting it into action with the big goal of launching five new Spark in the Dark chapters in both Michigan and neighboring states in need of a Spark!

We’ll also be focused on strengthening relationships between our members and local businesses which want to get more involved with their communities by helping to create and manage business-run programs focused on the gaps in service of their area.

And above all else, the most important goal remains this year, and every year, to make sure that everybody has somebody in their time of need. To build thriving and resilient communities who care for and help their neighbors.