



James Blackstone Memorial Library

Board of Trustees

— 2023-2024 —

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Michelle Blank (Vice President)



For almost 4 decades, Michelle has harnessed her love for cognitive science and innovation as a technology entrepreneur. She built her career helping startups grow by taking “big ideas” that change the way we communicate, work, play and learn from concept through ideation and market success. Michelle has deep subject matter and marketing expertise in three key pillars of today’s digital world – the internet for perpetual connectivity, rich media for compelling content, and interactivity for user engagement. Branding and positioning are part of Michelle’s DNA. She enjoys nothing more than creating high visibility and carving out market leading positions for upstarts in competitive, fast-paced markets

Michelle brings a unique set of skills to the Blackstone Board of Trustees that combines her entrepreneurial business expertise (that includes strategic planning, business development, marketing, program development, communications, partnering, operations and financial planning) with years of experience serving on non-profit boards (she has served as board member, officer and president for the non-profit homeowner associations of virtually every community she lived in, and is currently the President of the Juniper Point Association here in Branford). Michelle relocated to Branford from her lifelong stomping grounds in NY/NJ in 2017 when she married for the first time at age 63. It was love at first sight with Branford (and her husband as well)! She is thrilled to be creating a stronger bond with her new home as a Library Trustee. Michelle is looking forward to help extend the impact and reach of the libraries services and programs by leveraging her track record of aligning strategic plans with tactical implementation to translate Blackstone’s vision into specific advocacy initiatives to support strategic plan objectives.

Michelle has a Ph.D. in Cognitive Science from the University of Texas at Austin and B.A. from Queens College of CUNY in Psychology/Communications Arts & Science. Her specific area of study and expertise is language processing. Today’s SIRI and ALEXA like voice recognition systems are based on cognitive science models of decoding fluent speech like the one researched by Michelle.

Chad Edgar



Chad has been practicing law since he was admitted in New York in 2002. He began his career at Sidley Austin's New York Office as an associate where he focused on employment matters providing both advice and representation in litigation. Thereafter, Chad joined Gerald B. Lefcourt P.C., a New York white-collar criminal defense firm, where, as an associate, he assisted in the defense of clients in high-stakes criminal trials in the federal courts in Manhattan and Brooklyn. In 2006, Attorney Edgar became an associate for and later a partner with Dawn M. Cardi and assisted her in defending indigent clients who were indicted for serious crimes in the federal courts of New York, along with continuing his practice in the area of labor and employment.

Before he was a lawyer, Chad was an academic who received a Ph.D. in English Literature from New York University in 1996 and was an adjunct faculty member at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Edgewood College.

In 2016, after being an expatriate in New York and a surreptitious Red Sox fan there for many years, Chad returned to the shoreline in Connecticut where he grew up to commence practice in his childhood state and eventually to found his own firm in Branford in 2019. When he is not working, Chad can usually be seen trailing after his young children in the neighborhood, at the playground, on the town green, or in the library (of course!).

Elizabeth Ferguson



Liz currently works as an Art Therapist at Smilow Cancer Hospital. She has experience as an Art Therapist at the Grove School in Madison, and also as a recruiting assistant at Simpson Thacher & Bartlett in New York. She holds a BS in Psychology from Trinity College and an MA in Art Therapy and Counseling from Albertus Magnus College. She served as President of Branford Community Television from 2016 – 2018.

Lynette Gannon



Lynette is a retired publishing executive with over 40 years' experience in all aspects of magazine and newspaper publishing. She has worked in New York City, Houston, TX, and in Connecticut.

She retired as the Publisher of the Minuteman Newspapers based in Westport, Ct with weekly publications in both Westport and Fairfield, Ct in addition to monthly titles of Connecticut County Kids and Fairfield County Times.

She has extensive experience working with non-profit organizations, serving on their Boards and chairing other events, especially auctions, both silent and live. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Dayton with a major in English and Journalism. She and her husband have resided in Branford for five years.

Nancy Asher Goldstein



Nancy is a retired Physical Therapist who received her BS degree from Quinnipiac University. She spent the majority of her career at The Hospital of Saint Raphael. While at Saint Raphael's, she was a member of the team that developed and instituted the TakeHeart Cardiac Rehabilitation program. In her role at TakeHeart she developed and revised protocols, provided patient and community education, and assisted with marketing. She helped it navigate many milestones and changes in the cardiac rehabilitation field, and helped the program celebrate its twentieth anniversary. She was a member of the hospital's Red Cross blood drive committee, the coordinator of the TakeHeart team for the American Heart Association Walk, a member of the hospital's March of Dime Walk team, and assisted with recruitment of employees to contribute to the hospital's capital campaigns. She spent the last ten years of her career at Evergreen Woods where she gained an expertise in geriatrics.

Nancy was recently involved in Branford Helping Families Settle, which helped welcome a family from Afghanistan to Branford.

Nancy is a lifelong resident of Branford, she lives in her childhood home with her husband. They have two children. There have now been three generations of Nancy's family that have benefitted from The Blackstone Library and Nancy considers it the crown jewel of Branford.

Cheryl Kaiden (Secretary)



Through C A Kaiden Communications, Cheryl delivers creative communications solutions for a diverse range of businesses, including GE, Walgreens, Merck, Medtronic, AXA XL, Munich Re, Housing Works, and many more. She has significant experience as a copywriter with projects ranging from executive communications to newsletters, blogs, and white papers. Cheryl has delivered manager communication training to thousands of leaders in numerous industries. She has extensive experience in organizational communications, diversity & inclusion, divestitures & acquisitions, and health, safety & environment.

Cheryl is currently a member of the Board of Directors for the Branford Food Pantry and is a founding member of Branford Gets Fresh. She previously was the Publicity Director and a member of the Board of Directors for the Community Dining Room from 2007 to 2015, and she was a member of the Patricia Andriole Volunteer Services Center Board of Directors from 2010 to 2015.

Mary-Rita Killelea



Mary-Rita Killelea worked for the Milford Board of Education as a Reading Consultant and Literacy Coach. She provided individual and small group instruction, assessment and diagnosis to struggling readers and served as a resource for school leaders, classroom teachers, parents and the community. She collaborated with educators, consultants and administrators to develop and write a new balanced literacy curriculum for the Milford Board of Education, Grades K-3. As a staff developer Mary-Rita was in charge of leading professional development for schools, supporting teachers in maintaining their professional knowledge base and implementing new initiatives. She also developed and presented workshops for parents to help them support their child's literacy learning at home. Mary-Rita began her career in education as a teacher in Grades 1, 4, and 6. Thereafter, she graduated from The University of Connecticut

School of Law and practiced law with a mid-sized firm for several years. She also has served on numerous community, alumni, and PTA boards.

Mary-Rita loves to read and has a deep personal connection to children's literature. She understands the impact and influence of literature, particularly on young lives, and celebrates the mission of the Blackstone Library "to provide essential access to information, resources and unique shared experiences to help ensure Branford is an educated and enriched community." Mary-Rita and her husband Jim moved to Branford in 1991. They have 4 adult children and 9 grandchildren.

Janice Kochanowski (Treasurer)

Janice's career spans over 40 years in the finance, accounting, risk and senior management positions with Synchrony Financial, GE Capital and General Electric. She is a graduate of GE's Financial Management Program. Most recently, she was the VP of Risk, Scenario Design and Capital Planning.

She also held various positions in finance including VP Financial Analysis & Planning and VP Finance Specialty Retail, Consumer Finance.

Janice's volunteer activities include the United Way, Habitat for Humanity, the Women's Network at Synchrony and GE, Build On, and Dress for Success. In addition, she is a parishioner at St. John Bosco parish where she serves as a church lector.

Janice holds a BS and MBA in finance and accounting from the University of Connecticut, Storrs campus. Janice and her husband, Robert have been residents of Branford for over 40 years. They enjoy running, cycling and kayaking.

Beth Law



Beth Law has been a member of the Board of Trustees since 2016. In her time on the board, Beth has served as the Chair of the Development Committee, helping to raise funds to support the Blackstone through various events including Hogwarts Halloween and An Evening with Spirits, and has helped steer the library through its award-winning renovation. She became Board President in July 2020.

Beth was born and raised in Guilford and has been a Branford resident for the last 12 years where she and her husband raise their two school-aged children. Beth is a Special Education Teacher at Cedarhurst School at Yale University, where she teaches a variety of classes including biology, chemistry, and psychology. She holds a Master's of Science in Special Education from SCSU and a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, Special Education and Elementary Education from Marist College. She currently also volunteers with Kidz Konnection Youth Theater in Clinton where both of her children are active thespians.

Andrew Melnick



During his nearly 45-year career as a lawyer and corporate investigator, Andy has served as a litigator, criminal prosecutor and corruption investigator. A 1977 graduate of New York University School of Law, Andy first practiced law as a litigation associate at the New York firm of Weil, Gotshal & Manges, before moving to the Manhattan District Attorney's office, where he served in the Frauds Bureau and the Office of the Special Narcotics Prosecutor.

At the New York City Department of Investigation (DOI), the city agency responsible for preventing and detecting fraud and corruption on the part of New York City employees and contractors, he served as an Inspector General and later as the agency's General Counsel under two mayoral administrations. At DOI, he spearheaded a series of major investigations, including the probe of the 1993 Parking Violations Bureau contract scandal that forced the resignation of several high-ranking city officials and the cancellation of the \$150 million contract award.

During the last 20 years of his career, Andy was a partner and General Counsel of the Mintz Group, a global investigative services firm. At the Mintz Group, Andy was a lead investigator for the Connecticut House Select Committee of Inquiry and testified before the Committee during the impeachment

proceedings that led to the resignation of Governor John G. Rowland in June 2004. Most recently, Andy led the Mintz Group's 10-year pro bono investigation that in September 2019 resulted in the reversal of an innocent man's 1996 murder conviction and the restoration of his freedom after spending nearly 25 years in prison.

Patricia Sanders (President)



Patricia Sanders, Ph.D., is a retired educator most recently as President of Post University in Waterbury, CT where she currently holds the title of President Emerita. Pat began her career at the School of Business at Central Connecticut State University achieving the title of Professor of Business. Her career at Central was followed by serving as the Dean of the School of Business at Siena College in Loudonville, NY and she ended her career at Post where she also served as Academic Vice President prior to being elected as President. Her areas of expertise include International Management Development, Entrepreneurship Education, and the regulatory environment of higher education. Pat was part of a team that proved management development seminars around the world, most particularly in Eastern Europe. She currently serves on the Board of Kozminski University in Warsaw, Poland and received an Honoris Causa from Uzhgorod State University in Uzhgorod, Ukraine.

Post retirement, Pat has been very involved in the New Haven and Branford communities. She is a small business mentor at SCORE of New Haven and served as its past Chair. Pat also is a member of the Branford Garden Club and its immediate past president. She also serves on the Town of Branford Green Committee-and is a volunteer at the Branford Food Pantry. Pat enjoys her volunteer work and views it as a way of "giving back" after a long and rewarding career.

Pat received her undergraduate degree from DePaul University in Chicago and went on to New York City where she earned a master's degree from Columbia University/Teacher College, and then completed her Ph.D. at the University of Connecticut.

Pat loves living in Branford and on the shoreline, which is a magnet for her children and assorted relatives, colleagues, and friends from around the world.

Jack Thompson (Asst Treasurer)



Jack is the Chief Executive Officer of Pawson Capital Management, an investment manager that focuses on bank investing. Jack serves (or has served) on the boards of six different community banks around the country. Prior to his investment management activity, Jack previously worked in operations research, consulting, and investment banking, all focused on the financial services sector.

Jack holds a BA from Yale University and an MBA (with honors) from the University of Chicago. He served as a First Lieutenant, Armor Branch, in the US Army Reserve.

He and his wife, Karin Ouchida, previously lived in New York City and have had a home in Branford since 2007. Karin and Jack have three children in elementary school. The family enjoys traveling, especially to visit their families in Arizona and California.

Sue Wharfe



Sue has been a Branford resident and very active library user for 35 years. She was born and educated in the UK, mainly in London. She has dual USA/UK nationality. She has a law degree from the University of Leicester and trained as a Psychiatric nurse at the Maudsley Hospital in London. When she relocated to the USA she worked in substance abuse treatment at Yale University at SATU. Since then she has switched her interest to working with seniors, helping to establish the Shoreline Village in Branford and working in home health care.

Sue has been very active in community activities in Branford, serving a 6 year term on the Branford Board of Education and a variety of other nonprofits such as Guilford's Women and Family Life Center. She is currently on the boards of Branford Microfund and Branford Affordable Housing. She is an enthusiastic member of Branford Rotary. She has raised 3 children in the town of Branford with all three children attending Branford Public schools. Her late husband, Jay Pottenger, was a clinical professor of law at Yale Law School.

Jeff Vailette (ex officio)

Jeff Vailette serves as ex officio trustee representing the Town's Board of Finance.



Victoria Verderame (ex officio)

Victoria Verderame serves as the ex officio trustee representing the RTM.



Barbara Rockenbach - Yale University Librarian (ex officio)

By the library's act of incorporation, the Yale University Librarian serves as an ex officio board member.

