

Building a Better Baltimore

Meet Holly and John Hoey—but don't call them a "power couple." These humble community leaders just want to make a difference in central Maryland.

BY KAREN HENDRICKS

Four months later,

it's still hard for Holly and John Hoey to find the words.

The fact that philanthropist MacKenzie Scott gifted \$4 billion to nearly 400 organizations, including six in the Baltimore region, is incredible enough. But the fact that the short list included the two Baltimore-area nonprofits they help lead? It still leaves them stunned.

When you talk to this couple, and learn about the way their lives' paths have intertwined to focus on community good, it doesn't take long to realize that serendipity has long played a role in their careers and marriage.

The Surprise of a Lifetime

"We were just so shocked, grateful, blessed and every word of happiness," says Holly Hoey, senior vice president and chief principal gifts officer at United Way of Central Maryland, summarizing the joy Scott's unexpected gifts brought.

"It was an amazing experience ... the whole thing was from another planet," adds John Hoey, president and CEO of the Y in Central Maryland.

The couple laughs, recounting the days leading up to Scott's Dec. 15 announcement. Here's how it all went down.



Holly and John Hoey

Tango Dance of a Timeline

Nov. 13, 2020: It was a Friday night, two weeks before Thanksgiving, when John received what he calls “an odd email” from someone claiming to represent a philanthropist who wanted to donate a substantial gift.

“My first instinct is—this is a Nigerian banking scam,” he admits. But the email was followed by a phone call explaining that an \$18 million gift would be forthcoming from Scott—“who I candidly blanked on, but Googled as we were talking,” John recalls.

This huge news could be shared only with a tiny few until Scott’s public announcement occurred. It meant keeping this incredible gift a secret from his wife—who, he ironically notes, “is a professional fundraiser.”

Early December 2020: In the meantime, at United Way, Holly’s CEO learned that the organization would be receiving a \$20 million gift—the single largest gift in the nonprofit’s 95-year history. At this point, Holly knew two things—that the gift was coming and its amount.

Dec. 14: John was given a 24-hour notice that Scott was going to publicly announce the 384 recipients of her gifts the next day. He felt relieved that he could finally share his amazing news—especially with his wife. But that night Holly threw him a curveball.

“Holly told me that night she had big news but couldn’t tell me,” John says. Neither one of them spilled the beans to each other.

Dec. 15: Holly—like any other American or Baltimore resident—was reading MacKenzie Scott’s announcement on Medium when she saw the list of recipients included not only her organization, but her husband’s nonprofit as well. She immediately dialed John, and that’s when the joyous couple put all of the details together.

“We were a very happy Hoey household—that evening was so special,” Holly recalls. “Once we understood the process MacKenzie Scott and her team went through, whittling the list down (from an original 6,500), and



Holly Hoey and her daughters Caroline and Ella complete at-home volunteer projects for United Way of Central Maryland.

the fact that United Way and the Y were included—we were so humbled to be chosen.”

But make no mistake, they realize the true benefactor is Baltimore.

“The greater Baltimore region is in such dire need, and these gifts are to the community,” says Holly, “because these dollars are going to help those in need—for housing, financial stability, education. This is for our community.”

The gifts’ enormity is still sinking in.

Jan. 18, 2021: “The fact that Scott made these transformative gifts to us—to be stewards—I want to call her and say thank you. That’s my nature, but there are stipulations (against that). It’s very emotional,” Holly recalls during this interview.

Community Connections

“There are so many good service organizations in the community, so I don’t want to slight any of them, but United Way and the Y may have the most extensive reach of any in the



John Hoey poses with Beth Harbinson, a group exercise instructor at the Dancel Y in Ellicott City.

community. United Way provides a safety net for so many people in need, and the Y has such a broad reach, from young children to senior citizens and day care,” says Patricia (P.J.) Mitchell. As the retired vice president of global sales for IBM, Mitchell has continued to stay active in the Baltimore community.

It was community involvement that brought Holly and Mitchell together. The two women met in 2000 when Mitchell helped launch the Women’s Initiative, now called Women United, at United Way.

“We have such a generous, committed community. People here really want to make Baltimore a better place.”

—Holly Hoey

Holly has considered Mitchell her mentor ever since. Twenty years later, Mitchell couldn’t be prouder.

“It’s just fitting that those two organizations with those two incredible leaders were recognized in this way by MacKenzie Scott—it’s well deserved.”

Many people might be tempted to call the Hoeyes a power couple.

“Other people would see them as such, but that’s not their presence—they’re about doing the work. Both of them, in my opinion, are relatively unassuming,” says Michelle Becote-Jackson, chief strategy officer at the Y.

Coincidentally, the Y is the third organization where Becote-Jackson has worked nearby or alongside John, so she’s had an eagle’s-eye view of John’s career evolution.

“If you ask where the Y operates, there are 13 family center Y’s and 100 programs, and John makes a point to go to every site, every year,” says Becote-Jackson. “He walks every camp, even in 90-degree heat, every before- and after-school program, every school. He holds that time sacred, and schedules meetings around those times. Being

connected to the work is that important to him.” The *Daily Record* honored John’s dedication as “Maryland’s Most Admired CEO” in 2012 and 2019.

Marriage and Mission

How do these busy nonprofit leaders balance work, their 13-year marriage and family—including their 11-year-old twin daughters Caroline and Ella, John’s college-aged son Liam and Buddy, the family’s Labradoodle?

Like many married couples who begin and finish each other’s sentences,

position 15 years ago, the Y’s focus on health and young people.

“I thought I’d do this for three to five years ... help them get turned around,” John says, “but I found I really love it.”

Holly, marking 20 years with United Way, says she still wakes up every morning with a passion for her work. They’re both honored to be connected to organizations with longevity: United Way will be celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2025, and the Y is in its 163rd year.

“Both organizations have served different purposes over the years, but their



Holly and John at the Y Turkey Trot

they respond simultaneously, “With humor,” followed by a laugh.

Indeed, similarities and serendipity may have brought the couple together. Both Holly and John began their careers in the private sector and transitioned to the nonprofit world. It was the Y’s CEO search—and pursuit of what John’s business acumen could do for the Y—that brought the couple together.

“I was single, divorced, and I never expected to remarry,” says John. “The whole thing makes sense in retrospect ... it was weirdly serendipitous.” Two things convinced John to take the

job is to be relevant today,” John says.

“And innovative,” Holly adds.

“Not taking the fact that you’ve been around for a long time for granted,” John continues.

“I cannot think of a better place for me to fulfill my day-to-day mission to help people in need,” says Holly. “We have such a generous, committed community—whether you’re talking about the city or the region. Baltimore has a lot of issues, but people don’t give up on Baltimore People here really want to make Baltimore a better place. We can do this.” □