

Dorchester Reporter

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The Lenny Zakim Fund has been seeking out and supporting local organizations that are dedicated to achieving social and racial justice since 1995. Zakim, the longtime out-front head of the Anti-Defamation League locally in the last quarter of the 20th century, launched the fund 25 years ago as a public charity after he was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer.

The fund works to support organizations through grant allocation, management assistance, fundraising, and more through the hands-on engagement of a volunteer board of directors. Many of the organizations funded are based in Dorchester and Mattapan or work to benefit local residents, including New England United for Justice, Immigrant Family Services Institute Inc., and Ground Mixed Martial Arts.

Eric Esteves, a Roxbury resident and executive director of the Lenny Zakim Fund, said his experience with the organization has come “full-circle. My introduction to the fund was many years ago, when I served on the board of an organization called Project Hip-Hop, which was funded by the Lenny Zakim Fund,” he told the Reporter. “I was part of an organization that was funded and now I’m the person kind of in charge of the organization.”

A philanthropist, educator, artist, community advocate, and technologist, Esteves previously served as Director of the Social Innovation Fund at The Boston Foundation. He joined the Zakim Fund last December.

He also previously served as a consultant for Root Cause, Harvard Business School’s Interpersonal Skills Development Lab, and the Boston Impact Initiative. In 2019, he co-directed LeadBoston, an experiential professional development program focused on socially responsible leadership, based at YW Boston.

“Lenny Zakim was very active against bigotry and discrimination,” said Esteves. “The fund grew out of his activism. Unfortunately, he passed away from cancer, but the fund has continued his work battling discrimination, hate, and racism. Achieving social change and equity in our communities requires building bridges between grassroots organizations, the people they serve, donors, volunteers, and community leaders.”

The fund supports organizations as far as outside of the city as Lawrence, Gloucester, Worcester, and Medford, but the majority of them are located in Greater Boston. Esteves said the fund is focused on inviting in and funding grassroots organizations. “We’ve also supported leaders and activists,” he added.

Each year, applicants are encouraged to apply for funding. “We try to cast a wide net and make the application as simple as possible. Then we have members who read the applications and make final decisions in the beginning of each year,” said Esteves.

“We are unique in that we have to fundraise in order to know if we hit our goal. Sometimes we end up being able to give out more.”

Esteves said the leadership team has had to maneuver their efforts during the pandemic, but were able to raise emergency funding. “Pretty early on we had an event that we had to cancel. We got checks out to people quickly and then launched an emergency fund. And, fortunately, folks were able to raise funds for that,” he said.

Looking ahead, Esteves is committed to continuing to keep burnishing Zakim’s legacy. “Our goals for next year are to make sure that we still fulfill our mission of social, racial, and economic justice,” he said.

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