

# Collective Giving: Small Sums Make Big Difference

## Local Women's Fund Eschews Casserole-making for Novel Fundraising Approach

By Linda Holderness

Do you ever dream of the good works you would help fund – if only you had a lot of money?

In western El Dorado County, you don't need to be rich to make that dream come true. Through the Women's Fund El Dorado, you can donate as little as \$200 a year and feel you are supporting the county's charitable needs in a big way. And, in fact, you would be.

The Women's Fund gives grants to nonprofits on the county's western slope through a process of "collective philanthropy" – essentially, combining members' donations, large and small, and targeting grants to agencies with the most compelling needs.

This June, for example, the fund gave grants totaling \$50,000 to Court Appointed Special Advocates, Hands4Hope, the Infant Parent Center, the Assistance League of Sierra Foothills (Operation School Bell), Placerville USD Family Resource Center and Senior Peer Counseling.

"It's kind of mind-boggling," said Cathy Bean, cabinet vice chair, "that for just \$200 each we can give out \$50,000 in one year." But therein lies the power of collective giving.

The success of the Women's Fund derives primarily from two factors: the commitment and passion of the organization's founders and members, and the elegant simplicity of its granting structure.

The fund began as the brainchild of three women who shared a dream. Beginning in 2004, Katy Peek, Madeleine Tammi and Stephanie Kresse wanted to find a way to help El Dorado County women become more influential and effective in their charitable giving, yet free them from having to bake casseroles for fundraisers.

Based on models in other states, they decided to bring collective giving to El Dorado County. The philosophy would be simple: Join the fund; help choose the grant recipients; volunteer or not – your choice, no guilt.

In 2007, the founders informally presented their idea to a small group of women, all of whom joined the fund's governing cabinet. Later that year, the plan was formally introduced to a larger group, and in 2008 the Women's Fund was established under the umbrella of the El Dorado Community Foundation. The foundation provides office space, fiscal oversight and administrative support.

"We're the air under their wings," said the foundation's director, Bill Roby. "We got them up so they could fly."

And fly they have. The Women's Fund has 270 members, including children and



Shown (l-r) Robyn Parker, grants committee chair; Lynnee Boyce, coordinator; Cathy Bean, cabinet vice chair; Maureen Carter, cabinet chair.

men. The membership fees are modest so that people of all means can join – a key to the organization's success.

The members – the crux of the donors – join at one of two levels: Keyholder at \$200 a year, Pioneer at \$1,000.

"For a lot of women's funds, the entry is kind of high, \$1,000 or more," said Cabinet Chair Maureen Carter. "We didn't think that would work in El Dorado County."

To ensure the perpetuity of the organization, a portion of each membership goes into an endowment fund: \$20 from Keyholders, \$800 from Pioneers. In just five years, the endowment fund has grown to \$230,000. Only the interest, along with other donations, is used for grants.

The annual grant amounts are determined by a formula: \$10,000 for Impact Grants (usually shared by three recipients a year); up to \$40,000 for three or four Focus Grants.

In keeping with its mission of philanthropy, overhead is a minuscule 1.5 percent of the budget. An anonymous donor pays for the lone staff person, Coordinator Lynnee Boyce, at 10 hours a week, plus office and printing expenses.

The members, regardless of contribution level, all vote in the grant-selection process. The Cabinet is considering changes this year, but the cycle has begun every January with a community needs forum of speakers advocating funding priorities. Then members receive an online focus ballot to choose areas of interest.

After they have come up with focus areas, usually four, bid proposals are sent out. The Grants Committee reviews the applications, and the members vote for the final grantees. The winning grants are

awarded at a Membership Gala every June.

In its six cycles of giving, the fund has awarded grants covering a surprising range of needs: children, education, the homeless, arts, culture and much more.

The flower baskets that beautify downtown Placerville? Paid for with a grant. As a bonus, jobs were created for members of MORE, who water them every week. "We get many compliments ... about how the flower baskets add color (to) Main Street," wrote the Placerville Downtown Association's Lisa Crummett in her thank you note.

Operation School Bell helps needy kids buy new clothes and supplies just before school starts, and Poetry Out Loud offers high school students the opportunity to learn about great poetry and their literary heritage.

At last year's awards gala, a middle-school student thanked the fund for supporting Girls Circle, which provides a facilitator to meet with groups of girls to counsel on self-esteem, bullying and body image.

The program was so popular other kids wanted to join and other schools are requesting it. The experience, the young woman said to a standing ovation, showed her the value of collective giving.

This year, the group will be working to build membership, with a new committee to head the task. One point being stressed: Everyone can join the Women's Fund – you don't have to be invited.

"This is not like the typical group you belong to," Carter said. "You can join, vote and be guilt-free. No one is going to think you're not pulling your weight if you don't get involved." — Linda Holderness is a freelance journalist who lives in Folsom, Calif.