

Launching a Legacy

In its inaugural year, the Women's Fund of Vanderburgh County surpasses expectations to create lasting community support

BY KATIE SIMS



"WHY NOT EVANSVILLE?"

The three words that served as inspiration eight years ago for the publishers of this very magazine were the same words a group of local women found themselves asking after reading a story in the May/June 2006 issue of *Evansville Living* about Impact 100, an organization of 100 women in Owensboro, Ky., who joined forces for the betterment of their community. Shortly thereafter, the idea for the Women's Fund of Vanderburgh County was born.

The premise is simple, say the founders of the fund: Amazing things happen when women get together to study problems, analyze solutions, and invest in their community. In its inaugural year, culminating in its first annual meeting last November, members of the Women's Fund overshot their initial goal of \$100,000 by raising \$118,000 from 180 women who signed on to be charter members. About half of it went to establish a permanent endowment, while the other half was awarded to the Boys & Girls Club of Evansville to help the organization expand the number of children it serves as it moves into its new headquarters in the inner city. In addition, three other community-based organizations that serve women and children were awarded grants of \$1,000 each.

The formation of The Women's Fund began as many efforts do that are spearheaded by women: Through a series of conversations among friends. A core group of women hosted small parties in their homes, inviting women they knew who might be interested to come hear more about the effort. Initially, they thought they might model themselves after Impact 100, and other similar women's funds that both limit the number of members and establish a minimum contribution to participate. But that didn't quite seem right for Evansville, so the group took special care to ensure this organization would be unique: opening up membership not only to individuals but to any group of women who would pledge \$1,000 to the fund. To maximize the impact of their money, the Women's Fund selected one major project to support each year to make an immediate and significant difference in the community and to fulfill their mission: Improve the quality of life for women and children in Vanderburgh County.



EVANSVILLE GIVING: Surrounded by founding members of the Women's Fund, Boys & Girls Club executive director Ron Ryan and resource development director Jamie Morris accept an honorary check from Fund member Rita Eykamp.

Jan Davies, co-chair of The Women's Fund along with *Evansville Living* publisher and editor Kristen Tucker, attributes this forward-thinking view to the fund members.

"I consider them to be real visionaries," says Davies, who also serves as executive director of the Girl Scouts of Raintree Council. "We introduced a new concept for the area, and they said, 'It'll work, and I want to help make it work.' Nobody said this wasn't going to happen. They caught the concept immediately."

Lynn Miller-Pease, one of the founding members of The Women's Fund and executive director of Leadership Evansville, Inc., says the concept was an easy sell. "Everyone came together as servant leaders with

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Comfort Zone

the desire to help women and children in this community in need,” she says. “Everyone was looking for a way to serve.”

And because they also were looking for a way to guarantee the Women’s Fund’s first grant-making endeavor would be a success, fund members had candid conversations about how the money should be distributed. They turned to Welborn Baptist Foundation Executive Director Marjorie Soyugenc for help. Soyugenc runs the largest philanthropy in southern Indiana and works closely with the organizations the foundation funds to make sure the foundation money is being spent effectively. Soyugenc joined a group of other members of The Women’s Fund and came up with a plan: They notified more than 400 agencies of the availability of the grant, and then began the painstaking process of reviewing applications – even conducting site visits at eight finalists’ locations.

Investments of the fund are managed by the Vanderburgh Community Foundation. Lu Porter, another founding member of The Women’s Fund who serves on the grant-selection committee, spearheaded the meeting with the Boys & Girls Club and the with the Boom Squad, Inc., a drum-line performance group that reaches out to at-risk children and teens. Both organizations were the four finalists along with ECHO Community Health Center, an inner-city medical clinic, and Holly’s House, an advocacy center for women and children who are victims of violence.

Porter, who was already quite familiar with the grant-making process through her job as the Community Reinvestment Act officer at Integra Bank – which infuses funds into worthwhile projects in the inner city – recalls the excitement of committee members when they visited the organizations for the first time. “It was phenomenal,” says Porter.

THAT EXCITEMENT was evident at The Women’s Fund annual meeting, when the final four candidates for the money made passionate presentations to the fund’s members, who cast their ballots for the final winner. While the

Boys & Girls Club was awarded the top grant, the three other organizations benefited as well: Beyond the \$1,000 grant each was awarded by the fund, many fund members wrote them individual checks, and volunteered to support their efforts in other ways as well. Jamie Morris, the Boys & Girls Club resource development director, says the fund’s selection of the club was both humbling and inspiring: “It is remarkable to see a new granting organization with the ability to award such a large grant in their first year.”

Davies says fund members are inspired as well. “I’m looking forward to one hundred years from now when someone opens up a history book in the Willard Library and says, ‘Wow, look what these women did! It started out so small, but just look how big it is now.’” ●

INTERESTED IN GIVING?

The fund will accept contributions for their 2008 grant through June 30. For more information about The Women’s Fund, contact Barbara Dicken, director of the Vanderburgh Community Foundation, (812) 422-1243 or e-mail barb@vcfoundation.org.



Women's Fund
of Vanderburgh County