Charlotte.com
The Charlotte Observer

Posted on Fri, May. 23, 2008

CHANGING THE FACE OF PHILANTHROPY

Women dig deep for a 'big impact'

$443,000 collected for children, homeless and the environment

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In an uptown hotel Thursday, more than 400 women gave $443,000 to five Charlotte-Mecklenburg programs that help low-income children, the homeless and the environment.

It is the fifth year for these grants from the Women's Impact Fund, one of a new kind of philanthropic organization in which women pool their charitable donations.

"You can contribute your own dollars and make a small impact," said chairwoman Judy Allison. "Or you can pool your dollars with others who have similar interests and make a bigger impact."

The group started in 2003 as a "giving circle," with 162 founding members, led by longtime friends and volunteers Mary Lou Babb and Claire Tate.

In five years, it has more than doubled into what Allison now calls a "women's collective giving fund."

Babb and Tate modeled the group after one in Seattle that was co-founded by Babb's friend, Colleen Willoughby, who spoke at Thursday's luncheon at the Westin.

"We have changed the tradition of philanthropy," Willoughby said. "It is no longer the solitary privilege of old men.

"Women are the new philanthropists. We have created a new architecture of giving ... that is inclusive of many generations and levels of wealth."

Each member of the Women's Impact Fund agrees to donate $1,200 a year for five years. A 60-member grants committee does extensive research on prospective recipients. Winners are chosen by vote of the membership from a list of finalists.

In its five years, the fund has donated $1.4 million to 19 community organizations.

"We support emerging issues," Allison said. "Things on the horizon and innovative solutions to critical problems."

This year's awards:

• $70,000 to Central Avenue Bilingual Preschool for an art development program for low-income Latino children.

• $98,000 to Seigle Avenue Partners for a Freedom School summer day camp program for low-income, inner-city children.

• $90,000 to Shelter Health Services for a full-time registered nurse to support homeless women and children with chronic health conditions.

• $98,475 to A Child's Place for social work teams to work with homeless children in high-poverty schools.

• $55,000 to Catawba Riverkeeper Foundation for Muddy Water Watch, to prevent water pollution from runoff at poorly managed construction sites.

The reach of the Women's Impact Fund doesn't stop with the monetary donations, Allison said. Several members have left successful careers to work for nonprofit organizations they have learned about through the fund.

Kathy Izard, a former graphic designer, is now director of the Urban Ministry Center's Homeless to Homes program.

Jerri Fatticci, formerly a financial adviser at Bank of America, is now executive director of Citizen Schools, which received a grant in 2006.

And Ann Browning left Bank of America after 23 years to become project director of the Carolina Thread Trail, a project of the Catawba Lands Conservancy.

"It was the first environmental project to get a grant from the Women's Impact Fund," Browning said. "Meeting them got me really interested."

At Thursday's luncheon, Dearsley Vernon, who joined the fund this year, said she "liked having a voice."

She was also impressed by the group's diversity of age (from 30s to 80s), income and race.

"It's not just the usual suspects," said Vernon, 46, chief program officer for Community Health Services.

"Women who have for a very long time been the foundation of the Charlotte giving community found a way to expand their ranks. The next generation of philanthropy is in this group."

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