

Knight Foundation donates \$10 million to improve digital literacy

By David Perlmutter

Posted: Monday, Sep. 13, 2010

The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation announced Sunday it will pump more than \$10 million into the Charlotte region to help people connect to the digital age and to foster an "improved and engaged" community.

More than half the money, \$5.75 million, will go to Queens University of Charlotte's fledgling communications school to teach digital and media literacy to all Queens students and spread that knowledge through the region and universities across the country.

Queens will name the communications school for James Knight, who with brother John started the media conglomerate that ultimately became Knight Ridder Inc., which owned The Charlotte Observer for decades. James Knight was a former Observer publisher.

Over the next seven years, the foundation will also give up to \$5 million to double a fund at the Foundation for the Carolinas for programs encouraging people to learn about and get involved in local issues, such as the arts or improving schools.

Grants from that fund could finance a range of efforts, said Marc Fest, vice president of communications for the Knight Foundation. "That really is something we envision to bubble up from the community itself. In some communities, it might involve digital technology. In other communities, it might be something benefiting the arts," he said.

The announcement was made by the foundation's board, which met in Charlotte on Sunday.

The Knight brothers created the foundation in 1940, first to provide financial aid to college students in Akron, Ohio, home to their first newspaper. Ten years later, it began dispensing grants for journalism causes and cultural and educational institutions in the 26 U.S. communities where they owned papers.

Lately, the foundation has championed the idea that American communities can't function without the free flow of information, focusing on projects that promote community engagement. It has funded blue-ribbon commissions to study the issue and worked to expand Internet access, primarily through libraries.

The Miami-based foundation also announced Sunday that it was giving more than \$3 million to 19 community foundations across the country to support local news and information projects.

The effort is part of a national, \$70 million Community Foundation Initiative, designed to help improve the country's "information health," said Alberto Ibarguen, the foundation's president and CEO. "Information is an essential community need," Ibarguen said.

Digital, media literacy

The \$5.75 million grant to Queens will place its growing communications school on the forefront of developing programs to teach digital and media literacies - not just to communications students, but to all Queens students, President Pamela Davies said.

The two-year-old communications school also will support annual conferences, a website and journal, all designed to chronicle Queens' work on the issue and provide a model to other universities.

"The whole world is trying to understand digital and media literacy, and this grant will put us in the middle of that discussion," said Van King, the communication school's dean. "As the technology changes ... our understanding of this issue becomes more critical."

Davies and King said Queens was chosen because the university is in the heart of Charlotte, a dynamic media market, and has historically melded public service into the basic curriculum for all undergraduate students.

It also helped Queens that Margie Knight Crane of Charlotte, daughter of Jim Knight, is on its board and has been interested in having the communications school tackle the issue of digital access.

Eric Newton, the Knight Foundation's vice president for journalism, said the foundation was impressed by Queens' connections to Charlotte - and its willingness to teach all students about media and digital literacies, and then expect them to take what they've learned into the community.

That program, he said, will be unique to Queens.

Last October, a report by the Knight Commission said that universal broadband is necessary for making Internet information accessible to everyone.

And media and digital literacies are fundamental to being a "first-class citizen," Newton said. "If you are not able to apply for a job online, or access The Charlotte Observer website and leave a comment, then you're not a first-class citizen. You're not able to take part in the public dialogue."

More help for Foundation

The infusion of another \$5 million into the endowed fund at the Foundation for the Carolinas will double the total, making it possible for more grants to be administered for projects that promote "an informed and engaged community," according to the foundation.

Grants from the fund's earnings will be administered by the Knight Foundation's Charlotte office.

The Knight Foundation won't dictate projects, said Trabian Shorters, vice president of communities.

"It will depend strictly on what people in this community feel is more important."

More Information

Since making its first investment in Charlotte in 1969, the Knight Foundation has invested more than \$60 million in Charlotte. Recent investments include:

Early research and planning for the Carolina Thread Trail, the regional greenway.

The launch of the community engagement effort called "Crossroads Charlotte."

Nonprofit capacity-building through technology with nPower Charlotte Region.

And a \$5-million grant to the Arts & Science Council's cultural facilities campaign that led to the naming of the uptown Knight Theater on South Tryon Street.

Charlotte nonprofits seeking Knight funding should contact Susan Patterson, Knight program director for Charlotte, at 704-973-4566, or patterson@knightfoundation.org.

<http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2010/09/13/1688739/knight-foundation-donates-10-million.html#ixzz0znmtWeus>