

Women's Fund Op-Ed

by Jane Dwyre Garton, Executive Director, Women's Fund for the Fox Valley Region, Inc.

The Women's Fund for the Fox Valley Region has been working quietly in the community for more than a decade. For 10 years, we've been awarding grants for projects that benefit women and girls. That is our mission. That is our work.

It is women's philanthropy, a fast-growing segment of charitable giving. Statistically, women outlive men. Women inherit almost 70% of all estates. In many cases, women end up controlling their family's wealth.

Yet, in other circumstances, many elderly women end up in poverty. In America, 75% of the elderly poor are women.

As part of the international Women's Funding Network, we subscribe completely to this concept: "When women and girls prosper, communities thrive, and when communities thrive, the world becomes a better place for everyone."

The WFN awarded us a grant from their Venture Fund, underwritten by the Kellogg Foundation, in 2004. It provided us with the opportunity to meet with older women and learn about their concerns. From the women who worry about their ability to cover their health care costs, to the women who have made a series of life decisions including leaving their homes for safer living circumstances in retirement communities, we met expertise.

Life does that to us -- makes us experts.

Our Golden Thread Project was designed to acknowledge the importance of women acquiring the skills to become financially literate and ultimately to achieve financial security. It is about estate planning and charitable giving, yes. But perhaps more than anything, it is about encouraging women to identify what is important to them. A philanthropist, after all, is someone who exerts herself for the well-being of others. She donates money or gives time to causes she believes in so that the world may become a better place.

Just as it is not only the wealthy who need to do estate planning, it is not just the wealthy who are philanthropists.

Women's Funds benefit from many gifts and are grateful for every cent. Through the pooling of many gifts, an endowment fund grows and provides a flow of money into perpetuity. As we mark our 10th year in existence, we have been blessed to grow our grants from a total of \$8,800 the first year to \$34,000 this year. Our goal of gifting at a minimum of \$50,000 annually is within reach.

We know two things:

(1) The needs exist because we have received \$218,000 more in requests than we have been able to fund over the years.

(2) The donors are here in the Fox Cities because people here -- women and men -- believe in giving back.

Women do not just want to give money. Women want to make a difference. They want to see the impact of that money in their own communities. The Women's Fund for the Fox Valley Region, Inc., collaborates with area nonprofits to effect change for women and girls.

In our Golden Thread work, we encourage participants to think about money they've given to a single, charitable cause in the last year. Then we tell them to multiply the dollar amount by the number of years they expect to live. Our conclusion? There is great power in modest gifts given on a regular basis. Don't underestimate the value of gifts you have made over a lengthy period of time. Think about what you can accomplish for causes you cherish in the years ahead.