

Northwestern Now (//)

Q&A

Twenty-year dance partnership that keeps on giving

Dance Marathon gives check to local foundation every year and gets lots in return



March 03, 2017 | By [Stephanie Kulke \(/mailto:stephanie.kulke@northwestern.edu\)](mailto:stephanie.kulke@northwestern.edu)

Northwestern University's 43rd annual [Dance Marathon \(/https://www.nudm.org/\)](https://www.nudm.org/) (DM) will kick off today, March 3, and the giant check that will be displayed on stage 30 hours later is certain to make the exhausted dancers in the giant tent go wild with applause.

No one knows the drill better than the [Evanston Community Foundation \(/http://evanstonforever.org/\)](http://evanstonforever.org/) (ECF), Dance Marathon's secondary beneficiary for the last 20 years, making it one of NUDM's longest and strongest partnerships.

The giant million-dollar-plus check that has been held up for the last six consecutive years at the end of the dance-til-you-drop marathon reflects the money raised for the primary and secondary beneficiaries.

The longtime partnership between Dance Marathon and ECF definitely works both ways.

"We think of DM as a grant-making partner first and foremost, not just students who write us a check," said Monique Brunson Jones, ECF president and CEO.

"We adopt the entire group so we can teach them about nonprofit service. Our staff enjoys getting to know the students each year and being a part of their educational experience," she said.

ECF receives 10 percent of Dance Marathon's fundraising, which is disbursed as grants to Evanston's nonprofit community. (The other 90 percent of funds raised will go to [Dance Marathon's primary beneficiary, GiGi's Playhouse \(/http://stories/2017/february/dance-marathon-supporting-celebrating-gigis-playhouse/\)](http://stories/2017/february/dance-marathon-supporting-celebrating-gigis-playhouse/), a network of Down syndrome achievement centers.)

ECF rewards Dance Marathon's generosity by mentoring students in best practices in fundraising, introducing them to the local nonprofit landscape and by supporting DM's fundraising initiatives.

Dance Marathon's strength in creating and maintaining partnerships has been a key to its success: from establishing new relationships with its primary beneficiaries to strengthening ongoing relationships with corporations, campus organizations and alumni.

To understand what makes the DM and ECF partnership uniquely rewarding, we asked five questions of ECF's Monique Brunson Jones.

How did DM serve ECF this year?

DM's Executive Co-Chairs Jenny Halpern and Ian Pappas served on our grant-making committee, reviewing all the proposals that our board reviewed, all 43 of them! And they have a vote on which proposals should receive funding. This process gives them insight into the needs in Evanston.

For the past two years, DM's community engagement committee has chosen nonprofits to volunteer with during the year from our grantees. This year members provided after-school tutoring, helped with the Step Up for Recovery fundraiser for PEER Services and helped make a home livable for Community Partners for Affordable Housing (CPAH).

Each year the students help with our annual benefit, Celebrate Evanston. They are on-site all day to help with setup and serve as live-auction spotters. It's a huge help in pulling off this big event.

How does ECF support DM?

Our staff makes sure the students learn about the nonprofit community in Evanston and the community's needs as a whole, from an annual grant-making perspective as well as immediate needs that arise. A good example was the [Connections for the Homeless Entry Point project](http://evanstonnow.com/story/wellness/evanston-now/2016-03-24/74868/fundraiser-success-to-let-connections-re-open-showers) (<http://evanstonnow.com/story/wellness/evanston-now/2016-03-24/74868/fundraiser-success-to-let-connections-re-open-showers>). These shower and laundry facilities, which are so essential to human dignity, had been closed due to the state budget impasse but are now reopened. DM helped ECF create a catalyst fund for responding to emergencies.

Our staff shares advice about career options and provides letters of recommendation. We provide snacks for them, too. My daughter and I dropped off a treat basket for their final executive committee meeting, and the foundation is contributing snacks for the marathon weekend. We show encouragement by attending DM's alumni gala in winter and other fundraising events.

"It's a partnership of mutual support. We get to witness DM's energy – which is hopeful for us. And they get to see our long-term work, which helps inform where they want to go in life."

What makes ECF's relationship with DM unique from other donor relationships?

We think of DM as a grant-making partner first and foremost — a large group of them! Not just someone who writes us a check. We "adopt" the entire group so we can teach them about nonprofit service. Our staff enjoys getting to know the students each year and being a part of their educational experience.

What has the impact been of the cumulative 20-year funding partnership?

The sum total of Evanston Community Foundation's 30 years of grant-making is \$6.9 million. One million dollars of those funds are from DM — a significant amount. DM is part of our grant-making process. It is a benefit for our organization to be able to work with Northwestern in this way, and we appreciate the trust.

DM is one of the top college philanthropy organizations in the U.S. What could other philanthropists learn from it?

They can learn to get active. I love the person who can see the value of the funding and money they have and make a choice to get informed. The Dance Marathon students ask us questions we would never think to ask. I'm inspired by a young person who asks questions and challenges us about why we are funding one cause and not another, and how we make those decisions, because we can't fund them all. Bottom line: Ask questions and stay at the table.

- Pat Vaughan Tremmel also contributed to this story.

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[Back to top](#) ([//index.php/stories/2017/march/twenty-year-dance-partnership-that-keeps-on-giving/#top](#))