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Evanston Community Foundation Turns 25

BY ANNE BODINE

The Evanston Community Foundation's (ECF) slogan for this year's 25th anniversary is "We're here for good." The play on words acknowledges not only the foundation's staying power – its endowment has increased from \$3 million to over \$16 million in the last decade – but also the reason the foundation was established in the first place: for the good of Evanston.

In recognition of its 25 years building and managing its rapidly growing endowments and addressing Evanston's changing needs through grant-making and leadership, ECF will be hosting a celebration at the Woman's Club of Evanston on Oct. 13.

ECF has a lot to celebrate, thanks in part to what some might consider a gutsy move by its board of trustees in the late 1990s when a decision was made to sever ties with the United Way. ECF was established in 1986 under the auspices of the United Way. By the late 1990s requests for grants had increased greatly. The board, led by former Mayor Jay Lytle, recognized that in order to meet the growing needs of the Evanston community they would have to break ties with the United Way.

"The philosophy of the Foundation for the first ten years was to solicit unrestricted gifts and it did a really great job raising money," said Mr. Lytle. "But the new strategic plan said if we really want to be a true force in Evanston we had to become more endowment-oriented. We not only wanted to distribute money to the community, but assist donors who want to support Evanston in a variety of ways."

The hiring of president and CEO Sara Schastok in December of 2000 precipitated real change at ECF and allowed the foundation to give Evanston a locally determined source of funding for a wide variety of projects that would not be bound by constraints of the United Way's national system.

For example, they were now able to support Evanston's many arts activities and could fund start-up organizations that looked to fill gaps here.

"We could be more flexible on budget size and track record," said Ms. Schastok. "And Evanston would be standing on its own two feet raising funds from its residents, for its residents."

Ms. Schastok said ECF was giving out approximately \$85,000 in grants in 2001 compared to an estimated \$815,000 for 2012. In the same timeframe, ECF has grown its endowments from \$3 million to over \$16 million, she said.

The foundation prides itself on being much more than just a distributor of funds, however.

“We are here to help support other organizations and help sustain them because it is good for Evanston and that’s really our purpose,” said Ms. Schastok. “But we have always been about more than just money and one good example of that is the Leadership Evanston Program.”

The Leadership Evanston Program was founded by ECF in 1991. It is a 10-month skills-based experience that trains people in community leadership skills, broadens their understanding of Evanston, and creates opportunities for participants to build a network of colleagues.

Today, there are more than 500 Leadership Evanston graduates.

In addition to Leadership Evanston, ECF offers capacity building workshops to local organizations for a minimal fee. Programs such as “Grant Writing” and “Growing a Great Board” are facilitated by experts and would otherwise be quite costly.

In 2007, ECF launched a strategic grant to address the connections between the first three years of life and outcomes for young people as they leave high school. The plan, “Every child ready for kindergarten, Every youth ready for work,” addresses key community concerns.

“Our goal is that all Evanston children will enter kindergarten ready to learn,” said Ms. Schastok. “We are working with a number of partners starting with organizations serving children birth to age 3.”

The principal strategy is high-quality home visiting by trained professionals who offer support to young parents whose economic status places their children at high risk of entering kindergarten with lower vocabularies, undiagnosed developmental delays, and behavioral issues. This is a long-term project, a purpose well suited to a growing endowment.

“ECF sees its role as community convener,” said Jane Doyle, executive director and co-founder of Center for Independent Futures, a non-profit organization that helps adults with disabilities sustain new ways of living in their community. “ECF not only helps fund our cause, but connects us with other Evanston non-profits that also work with marginalized youth.”

Rev. Richard Mosley of Hemenway United Methodist Church recently worked with ECF to help set up a fund to support Curt’s Café, a local restaurant that offers training in food service and life skills for at-risk youth in Evanston.

“I wanted to donate to this cause that is dear to my heart, but was not exactly sure how to go about doing that,” said Rev. Mosley. “ECF helped me set up an endowment. ...they have a competent staff, good leadership and patience and understanding with people like myself. They made sure my goals became a reality.”

Ralph Segall, a past board chair and one of the original board members, said the impact ECF and its generous donors have had on organizations and people in Evanston is immeasurable.

“No one could have known how great the foundation would become,” he said. “It is an organization that was sorely needed in Evanston. Its reach and mission have expanded exponentially over the years

and it is doing a lot of good things. And still I believe its full impact has yet to be seen.”

“We have big aspirations,” said Ms. Schastok. “This is a community that looks to its future. One of my favorite sayings is ‘You can’t achieve anything if you can’t imagine it.’”