

Big donations make headlines, but ...

Small donations keep WACF growing

By Roger Whittle
Public Opinion Editor

When sisters Ruby and Dorothy Anritter remembered the Watertown Area Community Foundation in their will six years ago with a \$3.2 million gift, it was front-page news. And with good reason.

The gift was the largest ever to the Foundation, and it came from two women who lived well past 100 years old and were never known to have that kind of money.

There is, however, more to the story. According to Jan DeBerg, executive director of the Foundation, the multi-million dollar bequeathment wasn't the first time the sisters had donated money to the WACF.



"The first gift we ever received from the Anritter sisters was two one-dollar bills," DeBerg said. "The bills came in the mail, and it was a memorial gift for their friend Paul Sigelman, who had recently died."

Sigelman died on New Year's Day in 2002, and his obituary published in the Public Opinion two days later asked that memorials be directed to the Community Foundation.

And while that gift from the Anritters didn't make any headlines, DeBerg said it's the small

gifts that form the backbone of the Watertown Area Community Foundation. In other words, you don't have to be a lottery winner to make a difference.

"The majority of our donations are small gifts," DeBerg said. "As a community foundation, we are required to have gifts from a wide variety of people to show that we truly are supported by the entire community. If we didn't get those donations, we would have to be a private foundation."

Indeed. Even though the WACF boasts nearly \$20 million in assets, only a small percentage of donations come with a long string of zeroes. Even the Foundation's beginning was humble; it was started with \$3,000 that was left

over from money donated by local businesses and individuals for Watertown's celebration of the city's centennial in 1979.

And DeBerg tells the story of early Foundation board member Clark Redlinger walking up and down Kemp Avenue asking storeowners and customers for donations, collecting \$5 and \$10 gifts.

Another noteworthy small donation came in August 1987. Beth Helliard of Winnipeg, Manitoba, was traveling through Watertown and left her purse on a picnic table in a local park. Somebody found the purse and returned it, along with all of her cash and credit cards, to Helliard. She was so pleased that she sent a "reward" check for \$25 to the Public Opinion, asking that it be donated to a Watertown charity.

The money was given to the

still-fledgling Watertown Community Foundation, which at the time had just passed the one-half million dollar mark in assets.

An editorial in the Sept. 1, 1987, Public Opinion shared the story of the Canadian woman's gift. The editorial listed more than a dozen local organizations that benefited from the Foundation back then, many of which still receive WACF funds today: The Boys and Girls Club, the Mellette House Association, Town Players, and the Human Services Agency, to name a few.

The editorial ended with this thought: "Will the Foundation continue to grow? Only if each of us remembers through our contribution, whatever their size. ... It will be a gift that keeps on giving."

"Small gifts are really what made the foundation," DeBerg said. "and

once a donation is made, that money is always there. We only spend the earnings, so that gift of \$10 to \$20 is here forever. It joins our pool of granting funds and will always be helping our community."

There are many ways people can support the WACF. DeBerg said many donors commit to giving one dollar a day, "which is really doable for most people."

Another common way that people can support the Community Foundation is to request memorials for loved ones who have passed away. Instead of sending flowers, mourners can remember the deceased with a small donation.

"Flowers are beautiful," DeBerg said, "but a gift to the Community Foundation lasts forever."