

Community Foundation's program has a major impact on Watertown

By Julianne Endres

Watertown Area

Community Foundation

Doors are opening for area women and children, one by one, thanks to the Watertown Area Community Foundation's Women & Giving program, now in its 16th year.

"I'll never forget when a donor took me aside one day and told me, 'You don't have to save the world, Jan, you just have to save one,' and then one more, and then another.."

Now, Jan DeBerg, executive director of the foundation, recognizes that with each grant and thanks Women & Giving donors, from their very



first year to now, for making a difference one person at a time.

When community

leader Ann Sigelman was on the Foundation Board in 2004, DeBerg and Sigelman decided to

see what Women & Giving circles were all about and started laying the groundwork for Watertown's.

"The first few years were a bit of a struggle just trying to get people to realize what our purpose was," Sigelman said. "But we got some really good people involved and that really helped." Many of those women are still involved today.

Women's giving circles are made of like-minded donors who pool their resources to make a greater impact in grant-making to their community, DeBerg explained. "But more than that, we wanted to educate and inspire women to become leaders in philanthropy."



Courtesy photo

Women & Giving donor Cindy Burrell gets to know a Girls Rule participant on a visit to the program at Bramble Park Zoo.

Women & Giving has become a leader in local philanthropy, as to date nearly \$200,000 has been awarded by the group in grants and scholarships. Most of the monies, both for immediate granting and for the group's endowment fund, are raised at the annual Women & Giving fund-raiser. The donors are on a mission to help area women and children overcome barriers, increase their opportunities and achieve their goals.

Some impactful grants over the years include the ongoing partnership with Bramble Park Zoo, which began in 2008 when the zoo implemented the Girls Rule program for "at-risk" girls in both elementary and middle school. "Many of the girls don't walk an easy track," said Barb Struwe, Girls

Rule instructor. Some may not finish school, but Girls Rule plays a big part in combating that through building their confidence and self-esteem, as well as social and other skills.

"I love Girls Rule," said long-time Women & Giving donor Cindy Burrell, who was among donors who have visited the program on occasion. "You can really see the progress these girls make."

To date, the program has touched the lives of dozens of girls. Girls Rule celebrates many successes including that of Watertown High School and Girls Rule graduate Mackenzie Kleen, who is currently studying at Black Hills State University.

Women & Giving has supported the Delta Dental Smile Mobile visit to Watertown for several consecutive years in cooperation with Inter-Lakes Community Action Partnership.

“When the Smile Mobile comes to town, children who have had limited or no dental care are able to get care,” said Prudy Calvin, Women & Giving chair. This grant’s impact multiplies substantially as literally hundreds of thousands of dollars in dental care have been provided over the years for a fraction of the cost due to this effort, as well as the support of volunteer dentists and staff.

Women & Giving donors have been told many impressive statistics and stories about the Smile Mobile’s impact, but one that sticks with most is about a young boy who had severe behavioral problems. “His teeth were awful and he had pain from them his entire life,” Calvin said. “He was too little to express that with words and that pain became his ‘normal.’ No one knew those behav-

ioral problems stemmed from the pain he felt in his mouth until the Smile Mobile fixed his teeth. When the pain was gone, the little boy’s behavior improved and his life could go forward without the stigma of being ‘a naughty boy.’ What a difference this made in his life!”

The Beacon Center, which serves victims of domestic abuse, is another grant recipient that is close to donors’ hearts.

Through various grants, Women & Giving has supported many things from furniture and a commercial-size refrigerator to books about domestic violence. Toward the end of 2015, the center had another idea to help its clients reduce stress and heal as well as find new strength and confidence. A Women & Giving grant supported the purchase of two sewing machines and Threads of Hope began its first stitch and has been sewing strong ever since.

“The Threads of Hope sewing program is run 100 percent by volunteers,” said Dawn Sikkink, the Beacon Center’s executive director. “Sewing helps the clients work through some of their issues by using their hands and working on projects in Threads of Hope. For example, we have one of our clients work on a quilt for our Walk A Mile event. This will be her third year doing this project and we get such a kick out of her enthusiasm and pride that she shows when the project is completed and she can show off her handiwork.”

Women & Giving grants have been awarded to support LATI Educare, the McKinley School social worker, Watertown Healthy Youth Coalition, Boys & Girls Club, the Watertown Middle School Girls Night Out ... and more.

In addition to the grants, Women & Giving awards scholarships to local non-traditional female students.

“It’s just a wonderful feeling to see what some of these women have accomplished,” said Sigelman. “Many are full-time students and have a full-time job and kids as well. They are amazing and should be admired.”

“It is wonderful to see these students become independent and move forward with their lives,” Calvin added. “What a great example they are setting for their families and the community.”

They are all on their own personal mission to overcome barriers, increase their opportunities and achieve their goals.

Whether it’s a Women & Giving grant or a scholarship, the list goes on, said DeBerg. “Each has a story to tell of how, one by one, area women and children’s lives are changing for the better.”