

Somewhere to turn: Community Foundations help fulfill charitable goals

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I have had the privilege over the last two and half years of getting to know the communities in Erie County as the Executive Director of the Sandusky/Erie County Community Foundation. As I meet people in these communities, one thing never fails, someone will ask: What is a Community Foundation?

Community Foundations are complicated beasts and not easily explained with a catch phrase or one-minute elevator speech. So I've decided my inaugural The Power of Giving column will address this often repeated question.

A community foundation is a tax-exempt, independent charity that promotes and facilitates charitable giving. It helps individuals, families and businesses accomplish their charitable goals and helps local nonprofits as a source of grants and support for special programs.

When helping an individual fulfill their charitable goals, community foundations provide valuable guidance. Community Foundation staff must first understand what the donor would like to achieve in their community. Then staff provide the best options to meet that individual's goals.

One of my favorite examples of this is a woman who came to me and was interested in starting a fund to honor her parents who are now deceased. As we talked, I learned she was widowed at a young age and found herself a single parent of two young children. She didn't have an education and was struggling to make ends meet. She told me how her parents provided her with the opportunity to attend college and complete her degree. The difference that degree made in her life and the lives of her children was impossible for her to put into words.

We were able to set up a scholarship fund for single parents who were returning to school to obtain a degree. This scholarship is given in her parent's name and is endowed, meaning it will be there forever. So each year a non-traditional, single parent is given the opportunity she was given through her parents' scholarship fund.

Examples like this happen every day at community foundations all across the country. Donor-advised funds, charitable remainder trusts, designated funds and scholarship funds are a few options provided by the Community Foundation. The staff at the foundation also work closely with

professional advisers, such as attorneys, financial planners and CPAs, to help design gift plans tailored to each specific donor in order to maximize the tax benefits the donors receive.

Community Foundations contribute to our communities in several other ways as well. They act as an advocate for local nonprofit organizations, educate people, distribute marketing materials on philanthropy and partner with other community organizations to inspire and promote charitable giving.

Many people receiving assistance from local nonprofit organizations are the beneficiaries of what started as the vision of a generous local donor who came to the Community Foundation and said, "I want to make a difference." Without the support of local community foundations some nonprofit organizations would not be here today, leaving some of our most vulnerable citizens with nowhere to turn.

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