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Women's foundation lures new generation of givers

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The latest fundraising strategy for the Washington Area Women's Foundation began at a happy hour in the Beacon Bar & Grill, a hotel restaurant near Dupont Circle. Last December, 28 women, mostly in their late 20s and 30s, committed to donate \$1,000 to local women's causes over a two-year span.

The D.C.-based foundation, which had \$2.7 million in 2007 revenue, wants to sign up 1,000 individuals, resulting in a \$1 million fund. And more importantly, the strategy is an attempt to lure younger people who don't typically think of themselves as philanthropists.

Since its founding 10 years ago, the foundation has driven its fundraising with an ever-growing portfolio of donors-only clubs and giving circles that encourage women to band together and use their pocketbooks to knock out problems that less fortunate members of their gender face in health, education or employment.

There is the Washington 100, which began in 2003 and has 123 members who agreed to donate \$10,000 each over two years. There is the African-American Giving Circle, which focuses on job readiness and work force development programs. And there is the Rainmakers Giving Circle, a program for women committed to donating \$5,000 over two years to causes they choose, such as Silver Spring-based Passion for Learning, which engages minority girls in science and technology, and the Family Support Center Inc., of Bethesda, which offers education and support to parents.

Because women make up a large majority of single-parent households, they are the best way to reach at-risk children, said Phyllis Caldwell, who became the foundation's president in November.

For example, she said, a single mother "is going to make sure her children get vaccinated. Then that mom is going to tell her neighbor. And then 10 people get vaccinated."

Caldwell, the former head of community development for Bank of America Corp., said the foundation's campaigns have inspired extraordinary generosity among Washington's more well-to-do women.

In 2005, the women's foundation raised almost \$4 million -- on the back of an inspiring gala speech by Hillary Clinton -- and gave away more than \$1 million, a big increase since 1999 when it raised \$200,000 and gave away \$30,000.



Joanne S. Lawton

Starting young: Women's Foundation President Phyllis Caldwell urges young women to set themselves on the path of philanthropy early in their careers, even if they can give only small amounts initially.

However, the foundation's fundraising dropped to \$2.8 million in 2006 and then to \$2.7 million in 2007.

With the 1K Club, as the initiative born at the Dupont happy hour is called, Caldwell would like to get fundraising back to the 2005 level.

Despite gains by women in employment, pay and wealth, they are still far less likely than men to give gifts as large as \$1 million.

Only about 40 women have ever given \$1 million or more to a women's fund, according to the Women's Funding Network, a San Francisco-based group with 125 member funds on six continents, including the Washington foundation.

But the network also reports that women control 51 percent of wealth in the U.S., a number likely to grow as they outlive male peers and inherit more -- and donate more of their net worth.

By asking young female professionals for smaller amounts early in their careers, Caldwell hopes to inspire a lifetime of giving, a strategy Clare Winterton, a spokeswoman for the Women's Funding Network, said represents a "increasing and exciting" trend.

"Young women are often drawn to women's funds because they can see tangible community impact, as well as the chance to connect with other women who share common interests and concerns," Winterton said.

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