

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

Foundation Forms a Family Giving Circle to Teach Young People About Philanthropy

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By Judith G. Salerno

What role does philanthropy play in a family? In a community? Is giving and doing for others an afterthought or something that's part of one's DNA? And at what age does it begin?

These are important questions for families to consider when approaching their philanthropic efforts. The sooner your family starts the conversation, the better. Now, at the Foundation for MetroWest, we're hoping to help families do just that, and we hope to see other community foundations take on this important work.

Our new Family Giving Circle program, which welcomes its first group of participants in January, will bring together parents and children as young as sixth grade to learn about philanthropy, understand the needs in the community and how to effect change, and jointly determine where to give. Participating families will each make donations into a common fund. At the end of the 12-week program, the 10 young people and their parents will choose a local nonprofit to support.

Here are the steps to take if you want to create a family giving circle.

Step 1: Find partners to provide money for the youth grant making.

Partners can be individuals, community organizations, even parents of students in the giving-circle program.

The Family Giving Circle is an expansion of our Youth in Philanthropy program, which is now 20 years old and one of the largest programs of its kind in the country. Each year, it brings together 350 middle- and high-school students to learn about philanthropy and nonprofits, conduct site visits, discuss options, and then award grants to organizations of their choosing. Over the past two decades, more than 1,250 teens have participated and granted more than \$1 million to youth-development organizations in our area.

By expanding our efforts to families, we can encourage meaningful conversations about philanthropy around the dinner table. Too often, parents are unsure how to talk to their kids about giving or don't want to burden them with the responsibility. But it's not a burden. It's an opportunity to help young people appreciate what they have and realize what they can do for their community. We want to make those conversations easier for families.

Step 2: Build a curriculum.

We always want what's best for our kids, and part of that is building their character and moral compass. Parents today know there are steps they can take to make sure their children gain broader social and emotional learning skills. One such step is to help our children learn what is going on around them and gain perspective of the broader community. The definition of success should not be limited to getting good grades or winning a baseball game. Philanthropic literacy and civic engagement help redefine success, teaching our youths what it takes to give back to society in a way that is meaningful, has significant impact, and becomes a lifelong habit.

Step 3: Identify youth-serving nonprofits as potential recipients.

Philanthropy may begin at home, but it takes root in our neighborhoods and on our streets. We've seen the Youth in Philanthropy program open young people's eyes to the very real difference they can make in their community. The program focuses on charities that serve children and young people so that participants can relate to the issues they tackle. The program's alumni often continue giving and supporting organizations they learned about during the program, including our own foundation. Youth in Philanthropy alumni have gone on to work at college alumni giving offices, run for local office, set up social enterprises, work at community foundations, serve on boards, raise money for a cause, and launch service-oriented careers as teachers, nurses, or doctors.

Step 4: Stay in touch with alumni.

Measuring and reporting on the long-lasting impact of the program will seed future growth, recruitment, promotion, and funding opportunities.

The goal of the Family Giving Circle program is twofold: first, to give students a real appreciation for our community and a desire to fold philanthropy into their lives and, second, to help families understand that they can get involved in numerous ways and that their philanthropic efforts have a long-term impact. Based on our experience with the Youth in Philanthropy program, where 90 percent of participants stay involved in philanthropy after graduation, we have high hopes that our new family-based program will have similar long-term effects.

By offering our programs to the community, we want families to start building their philanthropic strategies and circles of influence. We hope foundations in other regions of the country will try a similar approach.

Today's youths constitute our next generation of community leaders, nonprofit leaders, philanthropists, and civic leaders. We have a collective responsibility to educate them about the importance of philanthropy so they can continue to do good in the world.

Judith G. Salerno is the executive director of the Foundation for MetroWest, an organization in Massachusetts that promotes philanthropy.

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