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West

Foundation for MetroWest teaches students to be philanthropists

Foundation provides the money so high-schoolers can act on what they learn

By **Kathleen Burge** | GLOBE STAFF | JANUARY 19, 2012



MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Jennifer Cooper Ubaldino (standing) advises students on the Foundation for MetroWest's Youth Action Council at its Natick offices.

This spring, the Foundation for MetroWest will award up to \$60,000 to local nonprofit organizations, the culmination of months spent reviewing grant applications, trekking to sites, and debating the merits of each proposal.

The decision-makers behind these awards: high school students.

The Natick-based foundation runs six programs that teach teenagers the basics of philanthropy, from how to read Internal Revenue Service forms to how to build consensus for the final vote. In the past five years, about 500 students have awarded more than \$300,000 in grants.

Philanthropy is no longer solely the domain of adults. Charitable groups are increasingly training high school and college students to make shrewd decisions about which nonprofits to support. And many, like the Foundation for MetroWest, are providing money to dole out.

At Boston College, professor Paul G. Schervish, director of the Newton school's Center on Wealth and Philanthropy, teaches a sociology course in which students research nonprofits and give away \$10,000 during the semester. Schervish received a grant from a program created by Doris Buffett, the sister of billionaire investor and philanthropist Warren Buffett.

This spring, students in a new Framingham State University course will learn about philanthropy, and distribute \$5,000 provided by the Highland Street Foundation in Newton.

"This generation is really important to all of us in terms of our philanthropy," said Judith Salerno, executive director of the Foundation for MetroWest.

The millennial generation, generally considered to be those born since the early 1980s, is viewed as especially important to charitable groups because its members are expected to inherit the greatest fortune of any generation in history.

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'It's a very serious and adult thing that we're asking the kids to do.'

Judith Salerno Foundation for MetroWest

“There is this whole anticipated transfer of wealth that everyone is assuming is going to be happening with the baby boom generation,” Salerno said. “So the idea of preparing the next generation to do smart, good things with that - that’s probably one of the bigger drivers.”

Salerno’s foundation has an endowment to work with five schools in Concord each year: the Fenn School, Concord-Carlisle Regional High School, Concord Academy, Middlesex School, and Nashoba Brooks School. Foundation for MetroWest also created the Youth Action Council, a group of high school students from around the region who spend a year learning about philanthropy and deciding which nonprofits should receive roughly \$10,000 in grants.

This year’s edition of the council has 21 students. The foundation provides most of the grant money, but asks the teens to raise at least \$1,000 themselves. Last year, the Youth Action Council divided \$8,700 among the Boys & Girls Club of Assabet Valley, Camp Starfish, and the Decibels Foundation.

The program offers a distinct benefit for the high school students, according to one alumnus from Wayland. “As opposed to just going to a service project, it gives you responsibility,” said Dan Blahnik, who took part in the foundation’s first Youth Action Council in the 2007-2008 school year. “You’re responsible for raising the funding. You’re responsible for distributing it, and having responsibility for evaluating the grants, and trying to make as informed a decision as you can.”

Students have long been involved in volunteer work - and many high schools require students to perform community service before they graduate - but they have traditionally raised money or donated their time to help a charitable group. The newer programs train students how to analyze nonprofit groups and award grants.

“They have to make a choice about who they’re going to fund with their \$10,000,” Salerno said. “It’s a very serious and adult thing that we’re asking the kids to do.”

Last year, as members of the Youth Action Council considered grant applications, they looked at “what’s the need, are they organized enough, why do they need this money, and what will happen if they don’t get this money?” said Alex Mahoney, a sophomore from Sherborn serving a second year on the council. “And if we give them half of what they asked for, will that make a difference?”

Students still raise money, and learn which fund-raisers work (a mobile hot-chocolate

stand) and which do not (selling scented pencils). Last year, for the first time, the group decided to send out letters asking friends, relatives, and neighbors for donations. A professor spoke to the group about how to write an effective fund-raising letter.

The letters brought in more than \$4,000, a record.

“I think it’s good that they recognize that raising money is a very big part of the nonprofit process,” said Jennifer Cooper Ubaldino, the foundation’s youth in philanthropy coordinator.

The students usually visit the charities they are considering. But last year, they faced a dilemma concerning Camp Starfish, whose programs include a summer therapeutic camp in Rindge, N.H. Since they had to make award decisions in the spring, the students couldn’t see the camp in operation.

“So we actually ended up picking Camp Starfish because we all loved the cause and it was great,” Mahoney said. “But there was a lot of tension about that choice.”

In Schervish’s class at Boston College, he split the \$10,000 among his 17 students, so each one of them had \$588 to give away. Two of the students used the money to buy land for a home for the elderly in the mountains of Peru, he said.

“It’s not just your parents’ philanthropy anymore,” he said. “It’s not just wealthy people’s philanthropy.”

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