Forum highlights critical needs of local women, girls

Nearly 75 community leaders and activists joined the Women’s Endowment Fund this fall to discuss the current landscape of issues facing women and girls in greater Akron.

These discussions were part of WEF’s biennial forum, held this year at the Girl Scouts of North East Ohio. Panelists engaged the audience in conversations about four distinct topics: women’s economic empowerment, women’s safety from violence, women’s health and wellness, and women’s creative expression.

As a result of the panels, the Women’s Endowment Fund expanded its funding priorities to meet rising needs.

For the last four years, the fund has concentrated on women’s safety and financial empowerment; this year, grants will also address women’s health and wellness.

During the discussion about economic empowerment, panelists emphasized the importance of teaching girls about money and independence from an early age.

“We need to get in by junior high and talk to them about what potential careers are out there, and what kind of education they need to get those jobs,” said Virginia Albanese, CEO of FedEx Custom Critical. “We need to mentor and champion these girls.”

Dr. Stacey Moore, assistant vice president of student affairs at the University of Akron, said women are now earning more doctoral degrees than men. However, only about a quarter of those degrees are in engineering or math.

“We need to start as early as kindergarten building self-efficacy for girls in math,” Moore said. “It’s important that they learn about decision-making, courage and confidence.”

Panelists with expertise in women’s health and wellness spoke about the current state of health care in Summit County. Marsha Schofield, program director of Access to Care, said there was a 26 percent increase in the number of uninsured people between 2004 and 2008. Recent economic conditions have only worsened the environment.

“A lot of our existing services are dependent on government money or philanthropy,” she said. “We need to sup-

Above: Pictured are economic empowerment panelists Virginia Albanese, Dr. Daisy Alford-Smith, moderator Angelina Milo, and Dr. Stacey Moore. Each of them provided valuable insights about women’s money and careers.

Left: Dr. Vivian von Gruenigen, medical director of Women’s Health Services at Summa Health System, discusses trends in adolescent obesity during the panel on women’s health and wellness.

“How do we rally the troops to go out and do something for our young girls? I can’t think of any (organization) better to do that than the Women’s Endowment Fund.”

– Dr. Daisy L. Alford-Smith, CEO, Girl Scouts of North East Ohio
value collaboration, particularly now, as social needs are growing and financial resources are limited.

In September, the Women’s Endowment Fund held its annual board retreat to discuss our current priorities and to review the results of an endowment campaign feasibility study. The purpose of the campaign is to increase the fund’s impact in the community by doubling our endowment by 2013, the fund’s 20th anniversary.

Also in September, we hosted our biennial forum. Nearly 75 women met to discuss current issues facing women and girls. As a result of this dialogue, WEF is now accepting funding proposals that address women’s health and wellness, financial empowerment, and safety from violence. Proposals are due Nov. 15.

In October, the fund held its second annual Outrageous Acts for Social Justice Awards event. Deb Lemire, president of Queen Bee Productions, and several other women in the community were honored for their exceptional commitment to social justice.

Finally, in November, we will have the chance to meet Christina Tchen, director of the White House Office of Public Engagement and executive director of the Women and Girls Commission. Ms. Tchen will be speaking about policies and programs that impact women and girls around the country. We are excited to learn more about those programs and explore ways we can use them to advance women and girls locally.

As you can see, the Women’s Endowment Fund has had a busy fall season. We, as a women-led fund, are doing our part to improve the lives of women and girls in our community.

If you want to join our team, I encourage you to give me a call at 330-696-5115. There is much more work to be done, and we welcome your input.

Wishing you a beautiful and productive fall season,

Tracy Carter, president
Women’s Endowment Fund
‘Outrageous’ event applauds women for acts of social justice

Lemire honored for advancing women’s issues through theater

Dozens of women gathered Oct. 14 to tip their most creatively decorated hats to local leaders in social justice.

The second annual Outrageous Acts for Social Justice Awards event, held at the Happy Days Lodge in Peninsula, honored seven women who have made a difference in the lives of others by fighting for social justice in their communities.

Guests were encouraged to wear outrageous hats, and honorees were presented with custom-designed necklace charms.

Deb Lemire, artistic director of Queen Bee Productions, took home the top honor for her commitment to advancing women’s issues through theater.

Lemire’s accomplishments include producing Ohio’s first professional performance of Eve Ensler’s Obie Award-winning play, “The Vagina Monologues,” and raising more than $100,000 for local organizations, many of which focus on helping women and girls.

Other women honored for their outrageous acts included Leslie Parker Barnes, founder of the Youth Excellence Performing Arts Workshop; attorney Debra Shifrin; Jacqueline Jackson and Sharon Hairston Dennis, whose fundraising has helped bring clean water to Darfur; Terry Heckman, executive director of the Battered Women’s Shelter; and Yvette McMillan, Women’s Division director at Haven of Rest Ministries.

Radio personality Heather Burns from 91.3 The Summit acted as mistress of ceremonies for the night. This was her second year in the role.

People’s Choice winners Deb Lemire, left, and Carrie Herman, right, show off their outrageously decorated hats. Lemire also won the Marie Covington Outrageous Acts for Social Justice Award.

Guests at this year’s Outrageous Acts for Social Justice event toss their hats in the air to celebrate women making a difference in greater Akron.
Three distinguished residents of the greater Akron community joined the Women’s Endowment Fund advisory board in September. Eloise “Elly” Mackus, Jackie McDermott and Debra Shifrin each accepted three-year appointments to the board.

Mackus, an Akron resident, is the interim CEO of CFBank. As a charter member of the Women’s Endowment Fund, Mackus said she “jumped at the chance” to join the advisory board.

Mackus brings more than 20 years of banking experience to the board and said she hopes to encourage young women to become business owners and entrepreneurs.

“All of us have benefited from the unselfish acts of others,” she said. “To pass along time, talent and treasure is to compensate for the good that has come our way.”

Mackus said she believes strongly in cultivating philanthropy by supporting those in need. “One who has experienced support is likely to pass it on to another,” she said.

Joining Mackus on the advisory board is Fairlawn resident Jackie McDermott, who has a long history of supporting the Women’s Endowment Fund.

For nearly a decade, McDermott has attended the Women’s Endowment Fund annual event, and she has spent several of those years volunteering at the dinner and girls’ tea.

She is also a dedicated community volunteer. In addition to having served on the boards of Walsh Jesuit High School and Goodwill, she currently is a board member of the Center for Nonprofit Excellence and a volunteer at St. Hilary Church in Fairlawn.

Professionally, McDermott works at Alcatel-Lucent University in marketing and development.

She said she is excited to join the board because she has a passion for serving young women.

“Think that by improving the lives of young women, it gives them examples of what they can stretch for and reach for,” she said.

“Even though it’s called giving back, it’s really paying it forward.”

– Jackie McDermott, WEF board member

McDermott said she would like to continue volunteering for the annual dinner and girls’ tea. She is also interested in board development and governance.

Like McDermott, Akron attorney Debra Shifrin first got connected to the Women’s Endowment Fund through its annual dinner.

She soon realized the fund’s mission of improving the lives of local women and girls was aligned with her own personal philosophy.

“I’ve always believed that it’s very important to give back,” she said. “The next generation has to learn how to be empowered to be philanthropic and to be advocates for their rights and for the rights of those who can’t speak for themselves.”

In addition to her pro bono work as an attorney, Shifrin also serves on the American Heart Association’s Go Red for Women Committee and is the campaign chair for the Jewish Community Board of Akron.

The Fairlawn resident plans to serve on the fund’s Development Committee, raising money and awareness for a cause she feels passionately about.

“In Judaism, the most important level of giving is to give to someone where they do not know that you’ve given and in a way that trains them to be self-sufficient,” Shifrin said. “That’s what the Women’s Endowment Fund does.”
Wellness expert uses yoga to help local women

Yoga is known for its transformative nature and the enrichment it brings to people’s lives. So when local wellness expert Gina Stankard learned about the Women’s Endowment Fund, she realized right away that there was a powerful connection between the two: namely, their commitment to improving women’s quality of life.

After a friend invited her to attend this year’s Women’s Endowment Fund annual dinner, Stankard walked away so inspired that she immediately started making plans to raise money for the fund.

She contacted Akron Free Yoga, a group that offers free yoga each week to local residents, and pitched an idea to combine the two efforts. Each week, for three weeks, Akron Free Yoga would hold a “Yoga for the Women’s Endowment Fund” event. Since the sessions are free, any donations made would go straight to the fund to help support its grant-making and outreach to local women and girls.

“I had been wanting to get involved with a local organization for awhile, so the idea of giving back was very much on my mind,” Stankard said. “Both organizations were instantly on board.”

The campaign kicked off in May at the Fairlawn-Bath branch of the Akron-Summit County Public Library. A total of 75 people participated, affirming Stankard’s belief that helping others makes people feel happier and healthier in their own lives.

“When we help others, our attention shifts away from the smallness of our individual problems and makes us feel like we’re a part of something so much bigger than ourselves,” she said. “Helping others also makes us feel really good, which actually improves our health.”

Stankard said she was immediately drawn to the Women’s Endowment Fund because of its dedication to local women.

“Its commitment to improving the lives of women and girls in Summit County really speaks to me,” she said.

Women’s Endowment Fund President Tracy Carter commended Stankard for her generosity, saying the campaign was a creative way to encourage philanthropy and make a difference in the community.

“It is an honor to have an entrepreneur merge two of her passions – wellness and philanthropy – to benefit the Women’s Endowment Fund,” she said. “Proceeds from the yoga classes will help us provide additional support to nonprofits serving women and girls.”

Carter commended Stankard for her generosity, saying the campaign was a creative way to encourage philanthropy and make a difference in the community.

“When we help others ... it makes us feel like we’re part of something so much bigger than ourselves.”

– Gina Stankard, yoga and wellness expert

You, too, can make a difference in the lives of women and girls

Did you know that donating your appreciated stock or personal property to the Women’s Endowment Fund this year could garner you greater tax benefits than in years to come? Your tax advisor can tell you more. No matter how complex the charitable vehicle, the Women’s Endowment Fund makes giving both quick and simple. Steve Schloenbach, Akron Community Foundation’s vice president of finance, can walk you through the process. Contact him at 330-376-8522 or sschloenbach@akroncommunityfdn.org.
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The Women’s Endowment Fund of Akron Community Foundation

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Women’s reproductive health needs are also greater than ever before, said Dr. Vivian von Gruenigen, medical director of Women’s Health Services at Summa Health System.

She reported seeing a significant jump in substance abuse and obesity in her OB/GYN patients, as well as a four-fold increase in newborns with narcotic withdrawal.

“There are simply not enough resources to care for these issues,” she said. “But we as a group can make a difference. The power is in the people.”

During lunch, forum participants discussed the value of helping girls discover their creative talents.

“We must take on the responsibility of making the arts available to our children,” said Leslie Parker Barnes, founder of Youth Excellence Performing Arts Workshop. “It changed my life because someone believed in me. Now, it’s my turn.”

Later, leaders of local violence-prevention programs told attendees that domestic violence is an ongoing issue in Summit County.

Domestic Relations Court Judge Carol J. Deszo said she often sees generational patterns of violence that need to be addressed through prevention programs.

“Before the violence ever happens, we need to be speaking to girls about what healthy relationships look like,” she said.

Concluding the forum, co-chairs Katie Smucker and Brittany Zaehringer thanked participants for their valuable input and invited them to continue the conversation.

A full forum report will be posted on Akron Community Foundation’s website in early November. To get a copy, visit www.akroncommunityfdn.org/wef.