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Karen C. Lefton: Kathryn Hunter and her legacy to women

By Karen C. Lefton

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The Women's Endowment Fund lost the honorary chair of its endowment campaign this month, just as it surged closer to its goal. We are truly saddened that Kathryn Hunter, a giant in the philanthropic community, will not be with us to cross the finish line as we conclude a drive to grow the Women's Endowment Fund by \$2.013 million in 2013.

Mrs. Hunter's legacy will live forever in the grants made possible through her generosity — and that of hundreds of others in our community who have come together to raise more than \$1.6 million already toward that goal. That is a feat that the founders dared not dream of back in 1992 when they embarked on a mission to create a fund that would support local programs for women and girls forever. Nearly two decades later, the Women's Endowment Fund is still this community's best-kept secret.

Marie Covington, who was the chief architect of the fund and an admirer of Mrs. Hunter's, continues to do a ton of heavy lifting for a cause so close to her heart. Back in 1992, Covington and a core of women leaders reached out to other women — some with capacity to give, all with an interest in improving the lives of women and girls in the community. They sent hundreds of invitations and made dozens of pitches over chef's salad at the old Akron Community Foundation offices. They got more rejections than acceptances, but they did not quit. And in 1993, with 100 women committed to donating \$1,000 each, they announced the creation of the Women's Endowment Fund. Mrs. Hunter was among the founding donors, and so was I.

As the single mother of a 4-year-old, I felt blessed to be able to make the largest charitable contribution I had ever made. Many of the other founding donors were just like me: Working to raise our families in a safe home, working to pay the mortgage or rent or tuition or just to put food on the table. And as I came to know many of them over the years, I came to discover that there are two kinds of people in this world: those who need help and those who can help. How fortunate we are to be among the latter.

Today, the 4-year-old is all grown up, a college graduate building her career and her life on the East Coast. And while she is not yet a person of means, she is a person of character and generosity, one who can and does help. Her donation is invested in the fund, and interest on that investment is helping other young women far less fortunate than she.

This year, the Women's Endowment Fund grants committee has \$95,000 to distribute to worthy programs, and the committee is wrestling with how to maximize its impact when the need continues to be far greater than the resources. The committee members are struggling to identify the most deserving programs from many deserving applicants, and the results of their work will be announced in a few months.

Over the years, the Women's Endowment Fund has funded a "Mobile Moms" program by H.M. Life Opportunity Services to provide transportation to work or school for moms, financial counseling programs offered by the Mustard Seed Development Center, a violence and sexual assault prevention program for teens offered by Children's Hospital Medical Center of Akron, an anti-stalking program offered by Victim's Assistance, the HEAL (Health, Education, Advocacy and Law) project offered by Community Legal Aid, a math and science program for high school girls offered by Project GRAD, and other efforts too numerous to mention.

So as we prepare to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Women's Endowment Fund in 2013, we thank the Kathryn Hunters of the world. Her friends and family will gather on Sunday for her memorial service at the Western Reserve

Academy, and the superlatives will flow. They will remember a woman who felt blessed and gave back. "She was an amazing woman," Marie Covington said. "A pioneer."

I venture to guess that Mrs. Hunter's \$10,000 gift to our endowment campaign might have been the last charitable check she wrote. I hope she knew how much we valued her generosity and her leadership. We will take good care of that gift, invest it wisely and ensure that interest from it is used to benefit women and girls in our community for forever. That is her legacy.

Lefton is a partner at the law firm of Brouse McDowell and co-chair of the Women's Endowment Fund campaign. For more information about the Women's Endowment Fund and the Leadership Giving Pyramid, see www.akroncf.org/initiatives/WomensEndowmentFund.aspx.

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