

W

hen one Howard County mother needed a \$400 deposit for summer camp for her twin special-needs daughters in June, the Women's Giving Circle (WGC) of Howard County didn't hesitate to

intervene. An e-mail went out to hundreds of the group's members explaining the situation and asking who could help. Within four hours the amount was secured.

But what makes the WGC unique is the entire \$400 was not donated by a single generous benefactor. Instead, eight women pitched in what they could manage — from \$20 to \$100. WGC makes philanthropy accessible to women of all economic levels, because as all the members believe, \$5 equals \$500 when women give together.

"That word 'philanthropist' is a little intimidating, but I really want to teach my children to give back," says Maura Dunnigan, an instructor at Howard Community College. A mother of five, she joined WGC's donor development committee this year because she believes in community and family and thinks the WGC does, too. But for a long time, she didn't think of herself as a philanthropist. "I just like the idea of the whole community contributing, not just the wealthy."

The WGC began in 2002 with one mission: to improve the lives of women and girls in Howard County. Its founders — longtime friends and self-prescribed feminists Yolanda Bruno, Jean Moon and Linda Odum — decided that instead of rolling up their sleeves, they would dig into their pockets, pool their money, and direct it where it would have maximum impact.

"We didn't want to duplicate or compete with existing charities," explains Linda Odum about their decision. Instead we're giving direct grants."

At the same time, the founders' forward-thinking baby-boomer mentality set up an endowment for the future, where the majority of donations are held in trust for the women of tomorrow. In other words, the WGC is in it for the long haul.

In seven years, the original membership of 16 has grown to 600 female philanthropists, granting \$134,000 to organizations like the Domestic Violence Center, Howard Community College, Grassroots and the Community Action Council.

There's no doubt the organization is thriving, and nowhere is this more evident than in the fact that the daughters of the original members have recognized the value in their mothers' endeavors and are now stepping into leadership roles with WGC. They are today's change-makers — educated, creative, inclusive and unified. They are the new leaders of Women's Giving Circle of Howard County.

But where their mothers' generation had to march and demand, the daughters represent a new wave of feminism. They are more gentle but no less powerful.

"It's never been a question that I would be involved," says Megan Bruno, a 36-year-old freelance photographer and

mother of two children who happens to be the daughter of founder Yolanda Bruno. She sits on the WGC's communications committee, along with the other founders' daughters, Beth Singleton and Courtney Odum.

"It would be impossible to ignore women and girls in our community. They're the ones that need us the most," says Bruno.

But she makes it clear that she's not the activist her mother was.

"She had to be more radical. We wouldn't be where we are without them. But I'm not my mom," says the Fulton resident.

EMPOWERING GIRLS

In the 1970s, a generation of women kicked down the doors of the good ol' boy network and demanded equal pay, equal rights and equal opportunity for women. Now they're using their influence and wealth to make sure successive generations don't face those same inequities. Instead of marching or protesting, these women are leveraging their dollars, thousands of them in fact, and investing deep in the foundations of their communities.

But even in a wealthy county like Howard, there are cracks in the foundation that supports struggling residents.

"The system is still not equitable. There's a whole other side to Howard County," says Kim Flyr, daughter of former WGC board member Arlene Sheff. Flyr recently took over the management of the WGC's Emergency Response Network, an e-mail alert to donors when a woman in the county is in financial crisis and needs a boost — either to pay for a train ticket away from a domestic violence situation or to cover a utility or car repair bill. Started by Sheff, the network only sends out alerts that come from five vetted organizations like Grassroots Crisis Center or the Domestic Violence Center.

There's also concern among WGC members about young girls and ensuring they grow up educated and empowered.

Beth Singleton, a middle school gifted and talented resource teacher for Howard County public schools, believes that more light needs to be shed on "how much pressure there is (on girls) to be perfect in so many aspects of their lives. They think they must be athletic, beautiful and academically perfect."

"Just because you can do everything doesn't mean you have to do all equally well or be equally invested," says Singleton, who is the daughter of founder Jean Moon.

Last year, the WGC sponsored a Super Girl Dilemma workshop at local library branches that was led by gender equity expert Phyllis Lerner. It was a step in the right direction, but Singleton wants the WGC to continue educating mothers and daughters on the issues teen girls are facing. She wants to see the communications committee use technology, like its Web site and social media sites like Facebook, to better reach more women and girls around the county.

"We need a grassroots movement to help girls stay strong, not just in their day-to-day needs but their psychological development," says Courtney Odum, daughter of Linda Odum, and new chairperson for the circle's communications committee.

continued on page 34

women's giving circle

by Lisa Kawata

THE NEW GENERATION

photos by Drew Anthony Smith



JEAN MOON, BETH AND JULIA SINGLETON

Beth Singleton (left), daughter of founder Jean Moon (center), wants to see the communications committee use technology and social media sites like Facebook to reach more women and girls around the county. Her daughter Julia, a high school sophomore, was one of the first girls to try Journey Camp.



LINDA AND COURTNEY ODUM

Linda Odum is a Women's Giving Circle founder. Her daughter, Courtney, is the new chairperson for the circle's communications committee.

"I think the public thought these issues were taken care of. That's not true. They still exist. We need to be aware of this and address it."
Courtney Odum

continued from page 32

"What I find alarming is girls are not having enough respect for themselves and their bodies, and they don't expect it."

Three years ago, the WGC partnered with the Maryland Leadership Workshop to offer a weeklong summer camp for middle and high school girls. Through the Journey program each summer, 25 to 50 girls from all over the county are taught communication skills, conflict resolution, group dynamics and interpersonal skills at Washington College in Chestertown.

Julia Singleton, a high school sophomore who is Beth's daughter and Jean Moon's granddaughter, was one of the first girls to try Journey Camp three years ago. Shy and lacking self-confidence at first, Julia says Journey empowered her to do things she never had the courage to do before, such as joining her school's debate club and writer's guild.

"I learned that it was OK to be myself around everyone," says Julia, who has taken advantage of other WGC-sponsored activities such as the Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) Expo held at Johns Hopkins

Applied Physics Laboratory in North Laurel. There she learned about science writing, a career field she had no idea existed and which now gives her a goal to work toward.

Her mom would like to see all the Journey girls reunited to discuss how that experience has impacted them as they've moved into high school and college.

"I also want to see opportunities for them to mentor new, younger Journey girls, so they'll be more embraced by the giving circle," says Singleton.

A MORAL IMPERATIVE

Reaching out to more people is the goal for all the WGC leaders and one that board member Maura Dunnigan thinks needs more attention.

The Ellicott City resident brought the idea of a WGC team participating in the Iron Girl Triathlon. Now the Circle Team is in its fourth year, reaching female athletes, many of whom were unaware of the Giving Circle's existence. Its motto is Running, Biking, Swimming, Inspiring, Giving.

"I want to see the giving circle go in a direction that engages lots of different

women," says Dunnigan, "to widen the demographic of donors to those who can only give \$25 or \$50, and to get younger donors and those earlier in their career."

She expresses respect for the founders, but she is very clear about one thing, "I don't want to be part of the old girls' network."

She wants to see other changes as well, such as giving more leadership opportunities to women not on the advisory board, and changing the annual meeting time, which is 4 p.m.

"It's the worst time to have a meeting. It forces women to find a babysitter to attend," says Dunnigan.

Bridging the transition of leadership is executive committee chair Buffy Beaudoin-Schwartz. The only board member remaining from the original 16, Beaudoin-Schwartz is the mother of four and the communications director for the Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers. She leads with positivity, energy and the know-how to get things done, says Flyr.

With three daughters, Beaudoin-Schwartz understands the stakes of the WGC's mission and what it will take to

fulfill it.

"It's exciting and empowering to pool your dollars toward things you care about," says Beaudoin-Schwartz, who believes that it's also valuable for men and boys to understand the work of the giving circle. Even her 13-year-old son is a donor.

In the list of its founding values, the WGC states, "It is a moral and ethical imperative to remove gender-based disparities that prevent women and girls from fully participating in and contributing to society."

Even within its circle, the membership doesn't reflect the diversity of the county — although it is the largest group of its kind in the county, says founder Jean Moon. Clearly, there's still work to be done.

"Women make 73 percent of a man's income for the same work," says founder Linda Odum. "And the violence against women is just not right."

"I think the public thought these issues were taken care of," says her daughter, Courtney. "That's not true. They still exist. We need to be aware of this and address it." **HIM**

YOLANDA AND MEGAN BRUNO

Yolanda Bruno was one of the founders in 2002. Her daughter, Megan, is now a member of the board.

"It's never been a question that I would be involved. It would be impossible to ignore women and girls in our community. They're the ones that need us the most."
Megan Bruno