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Charitable foundations have banner year locally

By HALLE STOCKTON

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Donors who planned their estates and penned their wills with charity in mind helped produce a record year of giving at a time when needs are the greatest in the region.

The Sarasota, Manatee and Venice community foundations awarded more grants and scholarships at higher dollar amounts than ever for their respective organizations this last fiscal year.

The foundations handed out a combined \$28.4 million to support education, the arts, health care and other services.

Nationwide, charitable giving fell 3.6 percent in 2009, one of the largest drops since the 1950s, according to a Giving USA report. But Southwest Florida's demographics - older, wealthier retirees, including several who left sizeable charitable donations in their wills -- helped insulate the local foundations from the lingering economic downturn.

"We always defy the trends because we're dealing with donors who are creating capital-size funds for perpetuity," said Teri Hansen, CEO of the Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice.

"While many donors are concerned because the market has caused their assets to drop, our donors are thinking of investing in the community. It's not just writing a check to charity."

Wendy Hopkins, grant and program services vice president for the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, said the death of retired commodities broker Edward Roberts was a major factor in the giving spike for the agency.

Roberts left a \$15 million gift designated to benefit community colleges, scholarships for single mothers and other educational needs.

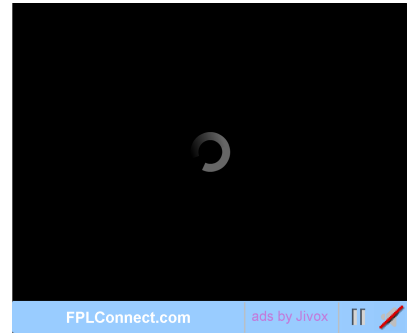
"When you bring in that kind of estate, it certainly helps with being able to put more money back in the community," Hopkins said.

Donors who passed on and left sizeable bequests also contributed to increased funds for the Manatee Community Foundation, said executive director Marilyn Howard.

One such gift was left by Jay Turner, who died in August 2009, and left about \$300,000 to support children's experience in live theater, Howard said.

"I think the people in our community should be thankful that we've had fellow citizens who have been farsighted and know there will be issues and challenges down the road," she said.

The Community Foundation of Sarasota County gave \$2.7 million more than the previous year, and the Manatee Community Foundation disbursed about \$160,700 more.



The Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice sent \$5.3 million more into the community than the previous year and also brought in a record \$17.5 million, which Hansen said is double the highest amount it has ever collected.

The majority of money distributed by the Venice foundation came from living donors, Hansen said.

The Sarasota foundation also established more funds with people who began estate planning last year, Hopkins said.

"As people look at their estate plans, they become more thoughtful about what direction they want their giving to go in," she said.

Sarasota resident Phyllis Siskel set up a fund in her and her late husband's name using personal savings with the Community Foundation of Sarasota County in 2007.

Siskel has a few organizations to which she always donates, such as the All Faiths Food Bank and the Animal Rescue Coalition.

"The foundation simplifies it all for me because they know what the organization's needs are from year to year," Siskel said. "There's a very definite need out there to be supportive of the nonprofit world."

Angel of blessing'

One of the area's fastest growing nonprofit organizations, the Independent Transportation Network, would not exist without a grant from the Community Foundation of Sarasota County.

That would leave hundreds of elderly or visually impaired adults left as "prisoners of their home," without a ride to the doctor or to lunch with a friend, said Donna Dunio, the network's executive director.

"The Community Foundation has been a total angel of blessing for us," Dunio said. "It was the seed money and their commitment that has kept the cost low and allowed us to develop a quality nonprofit program."

In January, the network began providing daily rides to those who can no longer drive. It has grown from providing six rides weekly to 22 rides daily.

The Community Foundation arranged a five-year commitment to the network, which received \$125,000 for each of the last two years and \$113,000 this year, Hopkins said.

Dunio said the grant pays for insurance, scheduling, mileage reimbursement, two employees and other administrative costs.

A \$249,322 grant under the umbrella of Literacy Empowers All Families also created a summer literacy camp operated by Children First.

The eight-week camp serves children who do not yet have the skills to enter kindergarten for several reasons, such as English being their second language, said Carol Butera, vice president of development.

"The children would not be kindergarten-ready without the camp," she said, "and that could mean they're an underperformer for life."

LEAF has received more than \$2 million from the foundation over three years.

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