



The Vermont Women's Fund

A Component Fund of the Vermont Community Foundation

Philanthropy Inspiring Vermont Women and Girls Since 1995

Autumn 2009

The Power of Partnership

Breaking Down Barriers to Women's Economic Independence in Vermont

In 2006, inspired by an anonymous donation of \$100,000, The Vermont Women's Fund (VWF) began looking at new ways to support the dreams of Vermont women and girls, emphasizing the spirit of collaboration and power of partnership which had long been central themes in our work.

We listened to experts in health and safety, employment, education and corrections, and heard that economic security issues and endemic poverty were underlying many of the problems facing women and girls across the state, such as domestic violence, substance abuse, increasing levels of incarceration, lack of education, and chronic unemployment.

To begin breaking down the barriers to economic security we needed some experienced partners. Again we tapped into the knowledge of experts, asking a number of nonprofit leaders for their suggestions. Which organizations were making a difference for women in poverty? Which organizations had the experience and staff to devote to a multi-year project?

Three organizations rose to the top, each of them former VWF grantees: **Central Vermont Community Action Council**, a large organization with extensive experience in community economic development; **Mercy Connections**, a smaller group whose programs for women emphasized personal transformation; and **Vermont Works for Women**, well-known across the state for non-traditional jobs training programs and innovative work with women in prison. From this new collaboration, a Strategic Partner multi-year grantmaking initiative was born.

We asked each group to design a two-year plan targeting economic security issues that would take their own work to the next level. Perhaps something they had waiting in the wings for just the right opportunity to come along. The ideas that emerged were just what the Women's Fund was hoping for, reflecting each organization's individual theories and practices for helping women take steps up the economic ladder and create lasting social change. While each of the work plans included some form of skills training to

improve the lives of individual women, they also had a component designed to bring about change on a bigger playing field—encouraging new policies and attitudes that could lead to long-lasting solutions.

For Central Vermont Community Action Council, (CVCAC), the **Build Your Money Muscles Workshops** had already been on the back burner waiting for a funder. The workshops were designed to provide low and moderate-income women with financial literacy skills. They learned how to create and balance budgets, get their bills under control, and assess their credit worthiness. In addition, CVCAC introduced a component on leadership and advocacy skills that many women needed to break out of poverty and feel a sense of control over their lives.

Mercy Connections dove in with an ambitious two-pronged approach by asking, "How can we effectively orchestrate transformative experiences that will motivate people to significantly address the issues of poverty in their lives and/or their communities?" To answer this, they created **Kindling Connections Certificate Program** helping women struggling with poverty issues to reframe their lives and gain the confidence they needed to begin looking for employment. They also convened the **No Name Poverty Initiative** bringing over 40 people from all walks of life to the table to break through class barriers and learn from each other about the true face of poverty.

The third Partner, Vermont Works for Women (VWW), engaged researcher Judy Harden to review national literature and conduct a survey of women in Vermont prisons. The results affirmed their belief that employment is a critical factor in helping women successfully transition out of prison and avoid re-incarceration. The groundbreaking study reached a national audience and also helped VWW develop the **Transitional Jobs (TJ)** program during the second year of Strategic Partner funding. With additional funding from the United Way, the TJ program trains and supports women in the corrections system, eventually placing them in jobs with area employers who understand the program's strong community benefits.

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The Vermont Women's Fund harnesses the collective power of giving to promote leadership, equality, self-sufficiency and philanthropy for Vermont women and girls.

Our grants are made from an endowment built by gifts of all sizes from more than 1,000 Vermonters.

In 2009, the VWF reached a milestone!

In 12 years of grant making we have invested over \$1 million in 127 organizations statewide, working to ensure that all women and girls realize their potential and building strong, vibrant communities throughout Vermont.

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Collective Power

By Lauren Geiger Moye—Council Chair

As I assume my role as Chair of The Vermont Women's Fund (VWF) for the coming year, I have been reflecting on the hand-off of this vital organization to our current Council's care. We welcome two new women this year, Judith Irving of Brookfield and Sarah Suscinski of Barre. In addition to the experience and insight they bring, I see that our Council as a whole has also grown and flourished through their work with the VWF.



Lauren (rt) with her daughter, Lizzie

We follow in the footsteps of many committed Council women, as well as our founding members who contributed so much of themselves to establish this organization that seeks to make systemic change by investing in the women and girls of Vermont. The VWF is one of 133 women's funds globally that give \$50 million per year to causes benefitting women and girls, and in the past 12 years of grantmaking The Vermont Women's Fund has invested over \$1 million in the work of 127 organizations throughout our state.

Through this work, I have learned a lot about the challenges facing women. Among the facts that stand out:

- A Vermont woman earns 81.3 cents for each dollar earned by a man.
- The US Congress is comprised of 83% men and 17% women. This representation of women places the U.S. 69th in the world.
- In Vermont, one quarter of all families in poverty are headed by women. That number increases dramatically to 42% for female-headed households with children under the age of 5.
- A study tracking the profitability of more than 200 Fortune 500 companies over 19 years found that the 25 firms that most aggressively promoted women to executive positions yielded higher profits. Yet less than 16% of corporate officer positions are held by women in the Fortune 500 sector as a whole.

These indicators strengthen my interest and resolve in seeing the VWF prosper and grow. Women's funds, like ours here in Vermont, share a vision of achieving long-term social change, focusing on more than providing funding. Through their grantmaking they also build the leadership, skills and influence of their grantee partners, making them more effective in advocating for women, addressing the challenges mentioned above, and achieving their goals.

As research shows, an investment in women and girls pays great dividends. Strong Women do equal Strong Communities. Help make *all Vermont communities* strong. Join me in supporting The Vermont Women's Fund.

Lauren has lived in St. Johnsbury, VT for 18 years and is a Senior Associate with Demont Associates, a fundraising consulting firm based in Portland, ME.

Coming soon... The 2010 Grant Cycle

Guidelines and application materials for the 2010 grant cycle will be available on our website October 30, with applications due January 12. www.vermontwomensfund.org/grantseekers

As the final partner in this collaboration, the Women's Fund, with direction from Council member and educational consultant Dr. Cynthia Char, provided the technical assistance needed to make the Strategic Partner Initiative a truly collaborative effort. UVM Research Assistant Professor Dr. Jennifer Jewiss was hired to help all the groups develop a common language and evaluation techniques to assess the success of both the individual projects and the strategic partnership as a whole. The Women's Fund also convened quarterly meetings charged with energy and excitement as the Partners exchanged updates on their progress, discussed challenges, shared ideas, and provided evidence of their projects' impact with data and stories about the women whose lives were being changed through the work.

At the final meeting in May 2009, the power of partnership shone through as each group commented on the highlights of VWF's new strategic grantmaking model. As an active partner in the process, the Women's Fund had created a new dynamic between the funder and the grantees based on collaboration and a common vision. The organizations were encouraged to build on their particular strengths and theories of social change and allowed the flexibility to adjust their plans as programs developed.

The success of the Strategic Partners Initiative will continue to break down barriers to women's economic independence as the Partners build on lessons learned for future endeavors and are joined by other organizations around the state in this shared vision. All three urged the Women's Fund to continue exploring multi-year, collaborative funding as an important way to make a concrete difference for women in Vermont.

For more information please visit www.vermontwomensfund.com/strategic-partners

Thank you to VWF Council member, Susan Ritz, for contributing this article.



In Their Own Words...

Girls Rock the Capitol

By Carmel Quinn—Director of Advocacy, Girl Scouts of the Green & White Mountains

Girls Rock the Capitol (GRTC) is a unique Legislative Internship program that immerses teenage girls in the democratic process, promotes team building and women's leadership, and provides a forum to discuss ideas and issues that are important to Vermonters. The program incorporates training and experiential learning as the girls work alongside women in leadership roles in Vermont government.

Alexis Lounsbury of Brandon participated for four years, starting at age 14. "When I began I had a terrible fear of public speaking," Alexis said. "I was quickly forced to face that fear head-on. Carmel took every opportunity to schedule workshops, talks and impromptu speeches where we would speak about what it's like to be a teen girl in Vermont. My experiences in GRTC have been essential in helping me grow into a more secure, sharper young woman."



GRTC participants with former Governor, Madeleine Kunin (lt) and GRTC program director, Carmel Quinn (rt)



The night before each statehouse session interns spend the evening at the Girl Scout Service Center in Essex Jct. "This is a great chance for us to discuss different bills in the Legislature, share experiences, get to know each other," said intern Rachel Sanguinetti of Berlin. "The next morning I met my mentor, Senator White from Windham. We sat in on the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee and heard testimony about the future of our police forces. The afternoon was spent discussing the stimulus package and how to spend it. It was an exciting day!"

Interns participate in 15 hours of public speaking, advocacy, civics and leadership training, and spend 12 days working directly with their assigned legislator. But the learning is not a one-way street. Girls testify to committees and provide an ever-present "face of the future" to legislators.

The outcome? Girls become critical thinkers, learn to work as a team to advocate for themselves and others, are better prepared for leadership roles in their schools and communities and have a rich understanding of the democratic process. And one day, they may even be in the Vermont Legislature mentoring a young woman just like themselves.

Girl Scouts of the Green & White Mtns received a \$5,000 grant from the Women's Fund in 2009 in support of this program. For more information on GRTC contact Carmel Quinn at (802) 878-7131



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Invest in Women ❖ Build Strong Communities

Annual Key4Women Forum

Now Is Not the Time to Retreat

Featuring author and woman business owner,
Nadja Piatka

Whether it's your business or personal life, learn why "Now Is Not the Time to Retreat" financially in today's economic environment. You'll be inspired and motivated by Nadja Piatka's amazing story of how she took a company out of her kitchen and created a multimillion dollar business.

Forum and Breakfast

Tuesday, October 27th ❖ 8 to 10 am

Sheraton Burlington

\$25 registration fee benefits The Vermont Women's Fund!

Information and online registration at
www.key.com/womensforum



Last year the Key4Women forum raised over \$10,000 to support The Vermont Women's Fund. We gratefully acknowledge KeyBank's continued partnership through this fantastic annual event!

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Help us save resources!

In the coming year, we would like to start offering an electronic version of our news-letter in an effort to conserve money and resources.



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www.vermontwomensfund.org/contact

and submit a form with your name, email address, and the word "e-news" in the subject line.

We appreciate your help!