

“Foundations’ unique alliance fosters non-profit sector development”

A unique collaborative agreement forged between two prominent local foundations to help develop the local non-profit sector continues to gather momentum as it moves into its third year.

Beginning Jan. 1, 2006, the Claude W. and Dolly Ahrens Foundation and the Greater Poweshiek Community Foundation joined strengths under the Ahrens Foundation’s then-new Community Support Services program. Since that date, nearly a dozen other local non-profit initiatives have come under the umbrella of this program.

The goal of the program is to allow the individual affiliates to devote time to their missions while the Ahrens Foundation provides non-monetary support – specifically in the area of administrative, back-office and financial services – creating communitywide efficiencies through shared staff and functions.

“We feel like this is a win-win situation, and not only for the Ahrens Foundation and for the Community Foundation,” says Julie Gosselink, president of the Ahrens Foundation and one of the creators of this unique model. “At the end of the day, we’re impacting the quality of life in Grinnell by helping all our organizations and community projects become stronger and grow faster, promoting collaboration among the groups and people working together.”

Grinnell-Newburg Education Excellence joined the program Jan. 1, 2006, along with other initiatives operating as parts of the Greater Poweshiek Community Foundation, including Grinnell-Newburg Dollars for Scholars and the Grinnell High School Alumni Association. The major capital campaign for the Grinnell High School expansion and the new Grinnell public library, also operating under the new community foundation’s aegis, were also early beneficiaries of the support services program.

Joining as affiliates of the program in 2007 were Communities for Literate Iowa Kids (CLIK) and Studio 6 and – most recently, in a partnership crafted last fall and which took effect Jan. 1, 2008 – Grinnell’s 18-year-old quality-of-life foundation Imagine Grinnell opted to ally its history, assets and future with GPCF and the Ahrens Foundation.

“This new affiliation will help us with office support so that our executive director can concentrate on the lofty tasks of pushing forward our projects and mission,” says Jim Powers, Imagine Grinnell board president.

“Best of all, the agreement provides Imagine Grinnell with the expertise of GPCF’s financial managers. Imagine Grinnell will benefit from GPCF’s investment strategies, which will help us yield better gains on the dollars our supporters have invested in us to improve our community. We know this move will benefit Imagine Grinnell, our volunteers, our philanthropic supporters, and in the long run, our community,” Powers adds. “GPCF has earned a reputation for helping important projects in our community and we are proud to be a partner.”

In addition to providing management of Imagine Grinnell’s financial assets, the partnership also includes management of Imagine Grinnell’s databases and mailings, budgets, taxes and payroll. IG Executive Director Melissa Strovers visits Ahrens

Foundation headquarters regularly to work with staff there on the transition, and is busy planning the IG annual meeting which will be held at the headquarters in Ahrens Park on Thursday, March 6. Learn more about Imagine Grinnell's quality-of-life initiatives at www.imaginegrinnell.org.

Todd Nelson, a former Imagine Grinnell board member and now president of GPCF, had this to say about the affiliation of the two organizations: "Imagine Grinnell and GPCF have always had a connection. In many ways, this move has taken both our organizations full circle. One of the original founding board members of both organizations, Tom Marshall, still serves on both boards.

"The GPCF mission has always been to strengthen the community. Our funding priorities include education, financial aid for students, public libraries, health care, arts and culture, public affairs and community development, social services, and agriculture and natural resources. In sum, our mission is to improve quality of life. The Imagine Grinnell mission has always been to improve the quality of life in the Grinnell community. Our board believes that Imagine Grinnell has the right mission fit for what we do.

Nelson said GPCF enjoyed playing a key role in "helping to facilitate other organizations meeting their dreams," and was quick to note the many benefits which their relationship with the Ahrens Foundation can provide.

"First of all, we have the ability to provide economy of scale for back office support through our relationship with the Claude W. and Dolly Ahrens Foundation. This is important because by consolidating the administrative work of small nonprofit organizations in our area, we gain efficiency. Donors to these organizations, including Imagine Grinnell, now know they are not supporting letter writing campaigns but instead the work, the projects. We are very lucky to have the service of the Ahrens Foundation to fill this role.

"The other great benefit for GPCF and our affiliates is that we are able to pool the dollars invested in each organization. This allows GPCF to invest in investment vehicles that yield greater dollars for all our partners. Rest assured, even though the money is pooled, it is tracked separately. Because it is pooled it helps grow everyone's investments."

For his part, Marshall – who founded GPCF in 1989 to assist donors in efficiently and effectively supporting nonprofit organizations that make life better for people in the Greater Poweshiek County area – is pleased with the effect the new collaborative model is fostering.

"The partnership with the Ahrens Foundation's "Community Support Services" program is helping multiple organizations be more efficient and effective in carrying out their missions," Marshall said.

In addition to the investment muscle which GPCF can offer by pooling assets, the affiliates of the Community Support Services Program also benefit from administrative support from Ahrens Foundation clerical staff who can help with such bread-and-butter tasks as data management, calendar management and mass mailings; support of personnel policies and employment practices, including payroll taxes and benefits administration; finance and accounting services, including support in developing budgets, expense management, cash flow management, financial statements and general accounting

services; and risk-management support, with assistance in development of board governance, regulatory compliance and non-profit “best management practices.”

“Physical space is another key issue,” Gosselink says. “A lot of these organizations don’t have office space, and they are able to come in and use our space here at Ahrens Park – whether for board meetings, individual meetings, community fundraising or social functions. We open this building up to them as though its theirs.”

Communities for Literate Iowa Kids (CLIK) joined under the Greater Poweshiek Community Foundation umbrella in January 2007.

“The CLIK project would not have a project coordinator if Greater Poweshiek Community Foundation had not taken it on,” says Nicole Brua-Behrens, CLIK executive director. “They made it possible for my position to continue.”

CLIK lost its original fiscal agent, the Iowa School Board Foundation, which said it would fund the project for five years but backed out when it did not receive the statewide corporate support it expected. Brua-Behrens had already raised funds locally from individual donors as well as the Ahrens Foundation, Grinnell College, Wal-Mart, and Poweshiek County Empowerment – who all wanted to keep the project going.

That’s when Greater Poweshiek Community Foundation stepped in to be CLIK’s fiscal agent. Through the agreement with GPCF, the Ahrens Foundation provides CLIK with human resources support, supplies, meeting space, risk management, and financial support.

“Having a very qualified person do the financials really makes me feel good. It’s wonderful to work with such great people who are so community minded – at both the Ahrens Foundation and the GPCF,” Brua-Behrens says.

“The more I hear about the Greater Poweshiek Community Foundation, the more amazed I am at the mission. What a cool concept, I never experienced a community foundation before, so I’m just blown away and thankful we have access to it and the Ahrens Foundation in Grinnell,” she adds.

CLIK has been in existence since the fall of 2005, bringing together community members from education, the business sector, the health sector, social service providers, preschools, childcare providers, and parents and citizens of Grinnell who are passionate about literacy. The project goals include getting parents involved in literacy; easing the transition between home or daycare and school; and publicizing the importance of early childhood literacy.

In 2007 alone, CLIK gave away almost 700 books at Music in the Park and several other community events, and organized volunteer readers at every *Music in the Park Thursday*. Other projects include a “Toddler Fest: which provided literacy programming for preschool children; working with kindergarten and preschool teachers to help prepare children for kindergarten; and a reading program at the Women Infant Children Program. For more information about CLIK, contact Brua-Behrens at nicoleclik@iowatelecom.net

2007 year was one of change for Studio 6, an after school arts enrichment program for children which came under GPCF and the community support services umbrella in October.

In August, Studio 6 became an official GAAC program, moved to the art factory and found a new lead teacher in Alesia Lacina. In addition, the arts council created a relationship with GPCF to handle Studio 6 bookkeeping needs.

“The big reason for doing this was the convenience,” says Tom Lacina, vice president of GAAC. Under the relationship, Greater Poweshiek has assumed payroll responsibilities for Studio 6 staff members, covers work-place insurance requirements, and handles the programs’ financial investments.

“The Grinnell Area Arts Council sees potential for a relationship with Greater Poweshiek beyond the Studio 6 program. There are opportunities to expand the relationship with them. Studio 6 was a first step,” Lacina says.

He speaks highly of the concept behind the GPCF.

The joining of the community benefit entities into having a hub – with the spokes of the wheel – to provide financial and technical support is timely for Grinnell. The laws are becoming more demanding of nonprofits in financial accounting and community benefit. It’s getting more complicated. Knowing that we have a resource available to make certain that you are doing it right is really good. This relationship frees people to do what they want to do, which is to improve quality of life. Most of the people who are developing policies and implementing programs are volunteers and citizens of Grinnell. They don’t have the technical expertise to take care of the things that Greater Poweshiek can do,” he adds.

Studio 6 provides after-school art programming for up to 23 children in kindergarten to fourth grade. Lessons have included recycled art projects, the study of exploration and creativity, and outdoor hikes in the woods that incorporate art. For more information about Studio 6 call Alecia Lacina at 641-236-6668.

Julie Gosselink says the idea of the Community Support Services was developed in 2005 when she and the Ahrens Foundation CFO and Controller Shannon Fitzgerald-Schultz were looking at how the foundation could utilize its skills and resources to improve the community.

At that time the new headquarters, which opened in June 2006, was under construction, and the foundation was also in close communication with Tom Marshall and his team at the Greater Poweshiek Community Foundation talking about the long term sustainability of the initiative – long powered almost exclusively by Marshall’s volunteer devotion.

Looking down the road Gosselink says an enormous transfer of wealth is in Poweshiek County’s future in the next few decades. “In turn, that means charitable giving will be at a higher rate, and a lot of those dollars could well end up in the community foundation because that’s where a lot of individuals do planned giving, estate giving, and giving in the form of scholarship funds.”

Brainstorming on how to make more “hands-on” approach to grantmaking in general at some point grew into the idea of providing support services to GPCF - and then beyond.

“We were thinking that there are all these groups in Grinnell that perform wonderful services and have wonderful missions, and they’re not really growing. But if there was opportunity to join with the community foundation, then it would promote collaboration, and further ideas and collective thinking. At the same time, in order to be

successful, there would need to be staff and resources in place to help them grow – and that’s where we came in,” she says.

The idea of providing services on a day-to-day basis to the community foundation was the first step in allowing it to focus on other community projects, such as the monumental task of handling private donations to the multi-million-dollar high school and library capital campaigns. At that same time, the new Grinnell Newburg-Education Excellence effort was getting off the ground, and also elected to operate under the GPCF umbrella.

“So that’s kind of where it started,” Ahrens said, noting that the private family foundation she heads offered GPCF and GNEE both three years of free day-to-day support services, beginning Jan. 1, 2006. Other organizations affiliated with GPCF have followed suit in the two years since.

Gosselink says the growth of the program is “faster than all of us expected – which is great!”

“It makes more sense for us to go hands-on working with these organizations. We feel we have the expertise, staff and resources to teach them and to work with them on how to create a stronger organization, and it frees up their time to go out and focus on their mission.”

GPCF and the Ahrens Foundation have decided that adding new developed organizations, like Imagine Grinnell, can be accommodated at the rate of one per year, and that separate funds for community projects can be added quarterly. Gosselink says if growth means the foundation needs to expand its staff to continue to provide quality services, “we will.”

In this pilot phase of the program, the services are provided free of charge with the exception of a percentage fee GPCF assesses for asset management.

“Our goal is to continue with services. They may not be free, but there will probably be some type of fee structure implemented as most all community foundations have in order to sustain their operations,” she said, adding that the Community Support Services Program will be offered only to organizations which affiliate with GPCF.

In the short term, the Community Support Services Program has been very busy and is now what Gosselink calls “a work in progress.” She knows of no other organization in Iowa – or nationally, for that matter – “that have this type of grantmaking model at the scale we are trying to do, so it’s very important to us that we maintain communication at all levels.”

“We want to make this a model for foundations, because it’s working,” Gosselink says. “We feel like we’re pretty proud of what we’ve accomplished, and this is only the beginning.”

Long-term, Ahrens hopes the foundation and its many community partners are creating a successful model which can help other communities raise the bar in their own busy non-profit sectors.

“We don’t want others to have to reinvent the wheel, so we’re trying to document this as we go. Our ultimate goal, not only here in Grinnell, but nationally, is to take this model and share it with the foundation field and nonprofit community so they could learn from it and do the same thing.”

“One of the Ahrens Foundation’s priorities is to promote community enhancement and community development, and through this program we’re able to do that.”

As time marches on, the list of affiliates of this successful program continues to grow: Kites Over Grinnell, Kids Against Hunger, the Iowa Transportation Museum endowment fund and the fundraising for the new aquatic center are other initiatives or projects which will benefit from GPCF’s rare and thriving relationship with the Ahrens Foundation.