

FAMILY FOUNDATION CELEBRATES A DECADE OF GRANTMAKING



Photo: Hazel Blennerhassett (right) on a site visit in Costa Rica

ALL RELATIVE

She may have retired from her career in the non-profit sector, but Hazel Blennerhassett is still reviewing grant applications, managing budgets and visiting agencies that request funding.

A former staff member of The Winnipeg Foundation, Blennerhassett knows a thing or two about funding applications. She also served for six years on the United Way's Family Services Panel, worked as a consultant for the Thomas Sill Foundation, and was involved in granting decisions for the Manitoba Council for International Cooperation.

These days, she reviews funding requests to the Blennerhassett Family Foundation (BFF), a managed fund at The Winnipeg Foundation that operates as an independent granting body. Blennerhassett established the BFF in 1998 with proceeds from the sale of a family business.

The organization is truly a family affair, she explains. The board consists of Hazel as chair, her husband, son, daughter, son-in-law, and one close family friend, "to keep us honest," she says with a laugh. Grantmaking criteria are based on the family's interests.

"One of the merits of a family foundation is that we can do whatever we like," Blennerhassett says.

For example, in honour of her grandfather, who was orphaned at a young age, the BFF supports disadvantaged children. Another focus area is women dealing with addictions and abuse; Blennerhassett is former executive director of the Laurel Centre, a counseling agency for women. The BFF also supports services for the mentally and physically challenged, micro-enterprise and environmental projects.

Photos: Projects funded by the Blennerhassett Family Foundation: Life and Arts Centre in Roblin, MB (1); Cloud Forest School in Costa Rica (2 and 3); mural at the Knowles Centre (4). All photos courtesy of the Blennerhassett Family Foundation.



"It's hard making the decisions because more or less everything that comes to us has merit," says Blennerhassett. "Sometimes we love [a proposal], but there are other things that we think are more important. Projects for abused children usually win out."

The board is thorough and diligent in its investigation of each of the approximately 15 requests it receives per year. Blennerhassett reviews applications and board members visit the agencies. Granting decisions are made at an annual meeting.

"Because we've been here for 10 years and made 81 grants, we get somewhat more [applications] than we can handle coming in," says Blennerhassett. "I do up a worksheet listing the money we've got to grant and the requests we have and we go through them one by one. It's generally unanimous, but we sometimes take a vote. We gradually work our way through to something everyone can support."

She's careful to point out that the annual board meetings are not typical family gatherings.

"I'm a fierce chairperson," she says. "When we are meeting it's strictly a business situation. I run this foundation as if it were any business foundation anywhere because my career background has been in grantmaking."

Over its history, the BFF has granted more than \$200,000 to a wide variety of organizations in Winnipeg and Roblin (where Blennerhassett and her husband now reside), as well as Canadian charities working overseas.

They've seen tangible results from their support, including: agricultural projects in Tanzania that have helped communities improve food security; an innovative biodiesel production project initiated by high school students in Costa Rica; resources for the Gladstone School Library; and creation of The Life and Arts Centre in Roblin, now a vibrant community hub.

In addition to seeing first-hand the benefit of grants, BFF board members have learned a lot about community need and developed relationships with organizations.

"Giving cash isn't the same as visiting an agency," says Blennerhassett. "You'll feel differently about an organization if you go down and see what it does. Every time we review an application, we get to know about what that agency does. It broadens your knowledge about what's going on in the world. And we have a living relationship with agencies – they're coming back to us and it's so neat to see how they've come along."

Blennerhassett is quick to recommend a family foundation as a means of charitable giving.

"Any family can do this," she says. "I can't solve the problems in the world. I can only solve the problems in my little corner. But it's our responsibility to listen to the stories, to know what's going on."

In addition to engaging families, Blennerhassett says such foundations offer a particular benefit for organizations that might not typically receive grants from larger funders.

"There's an important role out there for the small funder," she says. "We're flexible. We can fund an agency that hasn't gotten started yet. We take a bit more risk, we can look at things very early in their development."

