

# KANE COUNTY CHRONICLE

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## CHARITABLE INTERESTS

ORGANIZATION HELPS DONORS, NONPROFITS, BUSINESSES AND  
CIVIC CLUBS CREATE FUNDS, MAKE CHARITY AFFORDABLE. PAGE 4

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The Community Foundation of the Fox River Valley board member Jane Harris (right) and foundation executive assistant Rhonda Soos talk about a fund in honor of Mary Bencini.

# Making charity affordable

## Community Foundation helps donors create funds to meet their interests

By **BRENDA SCHORY**  
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Mary Bencini had taught second grade at Western Avenue School in Geneva for 34 years. So, when she died suddenly of a heart attack this year, it was no surprise that Bencini bequeathed a portion of her estate to a fund that provides scholarships to Geneva High School students pursuing degrees in education.

Her family established the Mary Hogan Bencini Memorial Scholarship Fund through the Community Foundation of the Fox River Valley, a 64-year-old organization that aids charitable donors to custom-design funds for philanthropic purposes.

"Since our founding, we have awarded over \$10 million in scholarships," Sharon Stredde, the foundation's president and CEO, wrote in an email. "This past May, we awarded \$949,000 in scholarships. Since our founding, we have awarded \$30.6 million in grants to local nonprofit organizations."

The organization began as The Aurora Foundation in 1948 but changed its name in 2006 to reflect its service area – which includes the greater Aurora area, the Tri-Cities and Kendall County – more accurately.

Donors can create funds to meet their charitable interests, with funds providing scholarships and grants to charities or churches, Stredde wrote in an email. The foundation also administers funds for nonprofits, businesses and civic clubs.

The foundation's summer newsletter lists all its funds and donors. Bencini's donors number more than 50, with couples, retired teachers, other Geneva elementary schools and PTOs – including the one at Western Avenue School – listed.

"The PTO at Western Avenue and all the faculty and staff held her in high regard," PTO president Kris Chapski said. "We wanted to be able to pay tribute to all her con-



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**Sharon Stredde (from left), president and CEO of The Community Foundation of the Fox River Valley, Jane Harris, foundation board member, and Rhonda Soos, executive assistant, pose for a photo in their Aurora offices. The Community Foundation of the Fox River Valley administers 394 funds or scholarships, including a fund recently created in honor of Mary Bencini.**

tributions to the school for all the years that she taught. She was active at school functions, active at the Geneva History Center; everybody just loved her, and she was very loved by all her students past and present."

Chapski said it was not uncommon for Bencini to write letters to former students if they did something noteworthy in the community.

"She was just one of those people who went above and beyond," Chapski said. "We would not have it any other way to honor such a woman."

Bencini's family intends to build her fund to endowment status so it will be a permanent remembrance of her life, Stredde wrote in an email.

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Another fund set up in 2011 was The Batavia Arts Council for the purpose of creating awareness of, and interest in, the arts and promoting the artistic, cultural and entertainment community in Batavia.

Among the donors was the Attic Christian Arts Center. Owner Tracy Smith said the year-old center is where art-

ists in dance and drama can come together in a Christian environment.

"We support their mission and share their commitment to create more opportunities within our community for the arts," Smith said of why she donated to the council.

In Sugar Grove's Prestbury subdivisions, resident Wendy Hirsch started the Sugar Grove Fire Protection District Water Rescue Fund. It raised \$25,000 to help the department buy rescue equipment and water rescue training, Hirsch said. Additionally, the department got a grant for additional funds to cover its expenses.

And it all started with a dog – a Yorkie named Petey – that wandered out over the ice of Blackberry Lake, one of three lakes and a slough in the subdivision, Hirsch said. The lakes are big and deep enough to boat and fish in.

"The dog drowned Dec. 26," Hirsch said. "It scares me because a child could have followed the dog if his mother had not been standing there."

Hirsch said Stredde was instrumental in getting their

fund up and running and contacting other donors who want to give to local worthy causes.

"She started the ball rolling," Hirsch said of Stredde. "The goal was to have two boats – one for summer and one for winter – and to get people trained. Without the community foundation, we could not have done this. ... I called her, and she said, 'I'm on it.'"

Sugar Grove Fire Chief Marty Kunkel said his department did not have a water boat rescue team, relying on partners. Kunkel said they responded to rescue the dog through mutual aid of other departments. And although Petey was alive when they brought him out, he later died.

Kunkel said he saw the need.

"We have very few open waters," Kunkel said. "But what if those kids had gone out there to get the dog? I talked to our board of trustees, and they agreed we needed to move forward on water rescue. But we had no money in the budget for this."

Kunkel credits Hirsch and the foundation with raising

### Know more

The Community Foundation of the Fox River Valley is at 111 W. Downer Place, Aurora. For information, call 630-896-7800 or visit [www.CommunityFoundationFRV.org](http://www.CommunityFoundationFRV.org).

the bulk of the money. The rest, \$8,600, came from a grant from the Illinois Public Risk Fund.

The department not only was able to purchase all the equipment it needed – from specialized ropes to life preservers to wetsuits – but it also had two people certified as water rescue technicians, who trained the rest of the department.

"It's more than just getting the boat out there and saying, 'Yep, we're here,'" Kunkel said. "You have to know how to use the equipment and support the people in the water. We are still in training."

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The foundation makes it easy and inexpensive to set up an endowment or scholarship fund. In short, it makes philanthropy affordable. All it takes is \$500 to start and information about how the sponsor wants it set up, according to the foundation's website.

The foundation supports itself and its work by charging small fees, but nothing for funds under \$10,000. It charges .5 percent on values up to \$1 million and .25 percent on values more than \$1 million.

It supports most of its expenses, two-thirds, through its own endowment, Stredde explained in an email.

"We charge no set-up fee or future fees on that fund until the fund reaches \$10,000 and the donor requests that the fund be invested separately to accrue its own income," Stredde wrote in an email. "A donor with a fund of \$10,000 or more could request that the fund not be separately invested to accrue its own income. That fund would remain in the pool of smaller funds and would not be charged a fee."



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