



Women's Fund of Santa Barbara

Giving More and Raising Less | BY NICK WELSH

At first, Easy Lift director Ernesto Paredes was bugged by all the questions. “No one ever questioned me like this before,” Paredes says of his initial contact with Women’s Fund of Santa Barbara, a decidedly unconventional philanthropic venture now approaching its 10th year of operation. “Who were they to ask me how I did my business?” he bristles.

Ultimately, Paredes says he managed to “put my ego aside” and quickly concluded that the intense scrutiny proved decidedly more helpful than intrusive. “They allowed us the opportunity to think bigger, to dream,” he says. And more to the point, to put those dreams into action. In Paredes’s case, the Women’s Fund gave a \$65,000 grant to Easy Lift Transportation, a non-profit transit provider that’s traditionally focused on the needs of seniors and the handicapped.

Santa Barbara, it turns out, has countless after-school programs for young children, but no systematic way to get the kids to them. Since Easy Lift got involved—offering free, safe and experienced transportation service at no cost to either the youths and their families or the 20 programs that signed up—Paredes says participation has increased 15 to 30%. In August alone, they

provided 2,500 trips. “That’s a lot of kids,” Paredes says. Thanks to this program, every third grader at Cleveland Elementary School was shuttled to Montecito YMCA for free swimming lessons. “These are predominantly Hispanic kids who typically don’t get swimming lessons,” says Paredes. “For them, it’s a matter of life and death. To be able to do this is a dream.”

The dream began about 11 years ago when Carol Palladini, a player in Santa Barbara’s philanthropic community since moving to town in 1996, had grown weary of the endless rubber chicken dinners, gala balls and extravagant fundraising events needed to generate the cash for the South Coast’s cornucopia of good causes. Inspired by Jacqueline Caster, who started Everychild Foundation in Los Angeles, Palladini set out to start an organization that gave all its money away to nonprofits serving women, families and children. To maximize impact, there’d be no staff—hence no salaries—and no headquarters—hence no rent. Nor would there be a board of directors. To join as a voting member required a donation of \$2,500 a year. (Eventually, in order to broaden the base, donors were allowed to pool their resources and form groups that collectively gave that same amount.) The only other requirement is that members vote on how they want their money spent. That takes

(Above) Girls Inc. of Carpinteria received \$50,000 from Women’s Fund of Santa Barbara for the Eureka! Program, which prepares young girls to attend college and pursue careers in science, technology, engineering and math.

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place electronically.

The Women's Fund holds only two group meetings a year—in April when the year's recipients are announced and in October when members visit the organizations they've funded. Although both events draw large and enthusiastic crowds, attendance is strictly optional.

By any measure, the Women's Fund appears to be thriving. Ten years ago, it had 68 members who gave away \$140,000. Today, its membership has swelled to nearly 600, the vast majority belonging to groups with names like "Instead of Shoes" or "Benevolent Babes." Now, it gives away roughly half-a-million a year. Typically, the grants are pretty beefy, ranging in size from \$50,000–\$100,000. Over the years, the fund has given away \$4.1 million to 55 groups. Of that, more than a million came in the form of matching grants provided by Orfalea Foundation and Betty Elings Wells. Santa Barbara Foundation has provided key administrative services, not to mention its tax-exempt umbrella. While administrative overhead sucks at least 15% from most philanthropic efforts, the Women's Fund boasts that it spends no more than three percent.

The Women's Fund differs from the vast majority of philanthropic outfits by not accepting applications. Instead, its research committee—about 20 women with serious business and professional credentials—seeks out organizations addressing issues the fund has deemed priorities. In short order, the organization's thoroughness became the stuff of legend. "They send investigators out to look at your financial statements, to talk

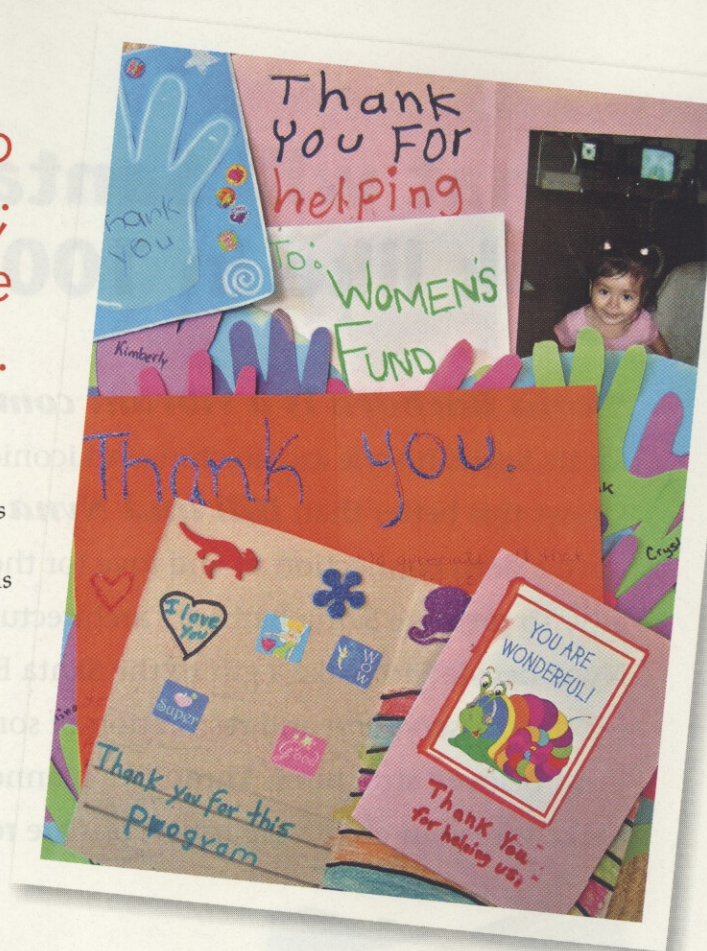
to your board members, to look at your staff," says Magda Arroyo, formerly of Westside Boys and Girls Club. "They do site visits and just when you think the site visits are over, they do another." Arroyo would eventually get \$75,000 to remodel the upstairs of the club to better segregate kids of different ages, key to winning parental trust. "To me, that's huge," she says.

The Women's Fund was among the first to bet big on the Dos Pueblos High School Engineering Academy—\$150,000—before it had garnered widespread national acclaim. It's not accidental that so many young women are involved in the program.

The Women's Fund cannot be accused of playing it safe, donating significantly to Palabra's anti-gang violence program despite law enforcement's increasing hostility to the program's founders, one of whom was recently arrested on gang-related drug charges.

It's also helped struggling organizations as well, like Santa Barbara Neighborhood Clinics and Casa Esperanza Homeless Shelter. The point is not merely to prop up existing organizations; it's to help them become more self-sustaining. For example, the new electronic record-keeping system the Women's Fund helped secure for the Neighborhood Clinics should allow the embattled organization to see more patients.

Some programs, obviously, will be more successful than others. The Women's



Fund invested in efforts to create a teen center at the intersection of Victoria and Chapala streets, but for a host of reasons, that center never caught on with the teens themselves. It's since been taken over by Police Activities League (PAL), a youth and sports program. Palladini notes that the money was spent on what the Women's Fund was told it would be, adding that PAL has benefited from remodeling work that the Women's Fund helped pay for.

The other big difference is that the Women's Fund is—as the name suggests—made up entirely of women. No men are allowed as voting members, and to date, no one has seen fit to challenge this. "Women think differently; they're interested in different issues," explains steering committee chair Sallie Watling Coughlin. "Women like to work with other women. And that's a strength." Or as founder Carol Palladini puts it, "It just works."

*For more information about Women's Fund of Santa Barbara, call 805/963-1873 ext. 362 or visit womensfundsb.org. **