



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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Local Philanthropy is Essential to a Vibrant Community

Amy Owen, Executive Director
Eastern West Virginia Community Foundation

Amy Owen and her husband have been residents of West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle since moving from Colorado in 1985.

Several family ancestors, including Revolutionary War Patriot Abraham Ellis and his wife, Catherine, were early residents and homesteaders of the area, building a home in 1780 that stands today in Berkeley County's Back Creek Valley.

Ms. Owen graduated with a bachelor's of science in environmental studies from the University of Alabama and received her master's degree in interpersonal communications from West Virginia University. For more than 10 years, she managed and directed fundraising programs for the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, based in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, and for two years worked for a private family foundation as associate director.

Since 2001, she has served as the executive director of Eastern West Virginia Community Foundation. She also has served on the board of directors of West Virginia Grantmakers Association, a statewide association of corporate, family and community foundations.

If you're not familiar with the community foundation model, you're not alone. Even though West Virginia has more than 30 community foundations across the state, it can take the lottery to put you on the map. But more on that later.

Every West Virginia community foundation has its unique hurdles and challenges. In the Eastern Panhandle, one of ours almost always takes folks by surprise: lack of local philanthropy.

Not the kind from you and me. Our *per capita* giving is on par with most of the state – even better than in some areas. Our corporations and businesses are as generous as most.

Local philanthropy is essential to a vibrant, healthy community. You can touch it, track it and see it. I hope you partake in it.

The dearth we suffer from is fellow foundations . . . philanthropic partners. We have less than a handful. One, actually. Over the past few weeks, I've had meetings with two nonprofit charities that are making difficult decisions to shut down and phase out. It is often family foundations and independent foundations that provide funding sustenance as well as philanthropic capital to help seed new programs and maintain agencies. While turn-of-the-century families and the well-to-do were setting up family foundations in Wheeling, Parkersburg, Huntington, Charleston, Beckley and Morgantown, somehow that seed didn't get planted in our eastern region. Until recently, our sister community foundations were way ahead of in us in assets, too. Some of their advancement had to do with the rapid income made from the extractive industry inherent in those parts of the state – and absent in ours. But, mostly, I think the idea just didn't



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take root here. No one "salted the dish" to get the notion of formal, permanent philanthropy into eastern West Virginia communities.

When the Eastern West Virginia Community Foundation started in 1995, it's fair to say we were starting from the trenches. Like other community foundations – there are more than 700 across America – our job is to teach and inspire philanthropy, while also strategically working to meet community need.

In a nutshell, community foundations work with local donors to build endowment. We invest the gifts we receive. And, through investment, we generate charitable income that rolls back into the community as grants and scholarships to a remarkable variety of charities and programs. As I like to remind folks, we seek gifts from every potential donor, not from just one rich family or individual – the common model for a family foundation. Community foundation donors are very involved. People instinctively want to give to something that supports the place they live and love, if the right giving vehicle is at the ready. And community foundations, with their broad flexible purpose, *are* at the ready.

For more than 21 years, I've been involved in non-profit work, mostly in fundraising, and for the past 10 years, as jack-of-all-trades, master-of-none: executive director of the Eastern West Virginia Community Foundation. We do our work in Jefferson, Berkeley, Morgan, Hampshire and Hardy Counties. It is, by far, the most rewarding job I've ever had.

Photo Credit: Mike Ross



Martinsburg resident W. Randy Smith (center), winner of a \$79 million Powerball jackpot in 2010, has since donated several million dollars of his winnings to various causes. State Lottery Director John C. Musgrave is at left, Governor (now U.S. Senator) Joe Manchin is at right

Over the years I've been here, we've evolved from no staff to part-time staff, then full-time staff, to a staff of three. We've had voluntary furloughs (Hello! 2009), celebrated sending hundreds of local kids off to college, and cried with families who had lost a loved one as memorial funds were set up. Our funds have provided grants to teach autistic kids to play musical instruments, helped adults with disabilities gain job skills, bolstered programs to help home-bound senior citizens, funded local recycling centers, empowered teachers with new technology in the classroom, stocked shelves at food pantries. The list goes on.

Since 1995, we've gone from our first \$100,000 gift (thank you Mr. George Hancock!) to more than \$16 million in local endowment.

It wasn't until we won the lottery, though, that we really made it into people's dinner conversations. Actually, Martinsburg resident Randy Smith won the lottery and he shared more than 30 percent of his take-home winnings with area charities, including almost \$6 million to Eastern West Virginia Community Foundation. Since his October 2010 gift, the fund he set up with us has rolled \$2.5 million immediately out into the community. The balance became permanent endowment – a funding source for programs that matter to him today, for generations of tomorrows (thank you Mr. Randy Smith!).

We still fall far short of the funding needs in our region, especially in these challenging times. But we are building a culture of local philanthropy that positively affects our local quality of life. In addition to good luck, hard work, and a remarkable cadre of volunteer leaders, a few key notions keep floating to the surface that, I believe, have helped my local community foundation stretch and grow. Here they are:

- Money does make the world go round.
- You can't take it with you.
- Buy low and sell high.
- Give a gift that keeps on giving – include charity in your will.
- Be a changemaker – find an issue that matters to you, and support it.
- You don't have to be "rich" to be a philanthropist.
- Philanthropy is essential to the American way.

Here's one more: Local philanthropy is essential to a vibrant, healthy community. You can touch it, track it and see it. I hope you partake in it.

(And, to the Eastern West Virginia Community Foundation donors who have, thank you!)

Find your local community foundation at www.givetowestvirginia.org

CONTRIBUTING TO THE VITALITY OF OUR COMMUNITIES



F. Thomas "Tom" Graff, Jr.
Charleston, WV

Tom is the chairman of the Chemical Alliance Zone, a non-profit group committed to maintaining and expanding the presence of the local chemical industry. He also is a director of the West Virginia Chamber of Commerce and Director Emeritus of the West Virginia Roundtable.



Rebecca M. Tinder
Charleston, WV

Rebecca is state coordinator of We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution, a program to promote civic competence and responsibility among the nation's upper elementary and secondary students. She also is a member of the Charleston Vandalia Rotary Club and secretary of West Virginia Partners of the Americas.