

PHILANTHROPY



Bergen's first 'giving circle' welcomes a founding member's inspiration, Gloria Steinem

STANDING UP FOR OTHERS Linda Mohr, Patricia Klecanda, Jennifer Natale, Susan Luthy, Valerie Vainieri Huttle and Renee Rubino

BY PAMELA WEBER-LEAF

Photos by Ted Axelrod

As an impressionable 14-year-old with a burgeoning interest in social-justice issues, Maxine Frampton was transfixed by the image of Gloria Steinem on a Phil Donahue Show panel, discussing poverty and homelessness with other activists for change.

"I'll never forget hearing Gloria saying that her fear as a young girl was of becoming a bag lady," the dynamic Frampton recalls, in vivid detail. "Here's this fabulous and brilliant woman, worrying about becoming a bag lady. It was a moment of clarity, that there's this vulnerability – that under the wrong set of circumstances, it could happen to almost anyone. It showed me that as a woman, your economic life is so incredibly important."

Fast-forward several decades, and Frampton is executive director of Women United in Philanthropy (WUiP), a three-year-old organization that culls its members' \$1,000-a-year contributions for a single annual donation to a Bergen-based

nonprofit helping women in need. As a so-called giving circle, WUiP selects each year's recipient by popular vote, from among a handful of proposals submitted by hopefuls. And, who better than Steinem to galvanize women to join, and to preside over the group's forthcoming gathering to announce this year's winner?

Frampton's self-described "dream come true" unfurls Oct. 18, at the Stony Hill Inn, Hackensack. WUiP's members and guests will surely be thrilled by a keynote speaker who calls herself a believer in the power of hope and new ideas to change lives. Steinem said recently, in a statement: "Hard times have made me realize that hope might be the most American of qualities, the reason many immigrants come here, and our best export by far. Unless we make a place in our imaginations for what could be, there's not much point in



STEINEM

believing anything."

From the original 15 women who imagined, back in 2004, what could be, WUiP has grown to about 65 members, each of whom gives \$1,000. It was the prospect of parlaying such riches – right in her proverbial back yard – directly into a cause she could help choose, that so energized Michelle Begina of Wyckoff, a founding member. "Right around the time Women United was forming, I was reading that Bergen was becoming the wealthiest

county in the nation," Begina says. "I was disturbed by the thought that there are people among us who are in need. I just love the power of our collective dollars, and how effective that could be, as opposed to what I could do myself."

Just how effective that power could be, has been made abundantly clear over the past 12 months. At its customary gathering at Stony Hill in October 2006,

PHILANTHROPY



(Front row) Sharon Kozinn, Laura Zink Marx, Julie Kampf and Lesley Collins; (second row) Lisa Hauser, Renee Rubino, Janet Sharma, Donna Shaw and Caroline Dorsey; (third row) Bea O'Rourke, Mary Ellen Snow, Jeanne Michaud, Denise Martin, Gina Plotino, Ellen Fitzpatrick and Maxine Frampton; and (back row) Pat Hagedoorn, Cathy Lowden and Cheryl Moses

WUiP named the Interreligious Fellowship for the Homeless (IRF) its initial grant recipient. (WUiP leaders had waited to begin issuing grants until the group's numbers reached 50, generating a \$50,000 "pot.")

Teaneck-based IRF, the only organization in Bergen that supports the working poor, had previously been using two-bedroom apartments it had available for housing. However, most IRF clients are just a mother and one or two children, explains Marsha Mackey, the group's executive director; when a larger family needed housing, IRF's overhead would have precluded the social services the family so badly needed.

WUiP's gift covered a year's utilities and low-cost mortgage for the family of five. But, the money also provided for case management and contributions to IRF's scholarship fund, as well as computers and other support to the after-school program at IRF's homeless shelter; for their mother to continue working, her three teenage children needed a safe and nurturing environment each afternoon.

Mackey was further thrilled to see

WUiP's involvement continue beyond the financial realm. The group's liaison to IRF, Jennifer Natale, has grown close to the family, even taking the teenagers on college tours. Mackey adds, "Working with this group, and everything they've done, has meant so much to us, and to the family – it's just been wonderful."

Natale is equally moved by her experience with IRF, and with WUiP. After relocating to New Jersey three years ago, she was searching for a philanthropic outlet that would call upon her skills as a former university-based counselor. Natale found this network of like-minded women incredibly receptive to her interest, and shortly after joining, was appointed IRF grant coordinator. Within weeks, she'd corralled members into amassing a house worth of furniture and cutlery – a veritable welcome wagon from someone who was, herself, a recent transplant of sorts.

Yet, one of the most attractive aspects of WUiP, Frampton notes, is that members have no commitment beyond that \$1,000 contribution, and their responsibility to be well-informed by the time

they reach the ballot box. A grants committee – to winnow the dozens of initial applicants into a small pool that submit proposals – comprises just a handful of women. Another committee organizes the annual event, as well as informal gatherings throughout the year that are entirely optional, and open to nonmembers.

The main event, with Steinem at the helm, is being sponsored by JBK Associates Inc., an Englewood executive-search firm headed by WUiP founding member Julie Kampf. Kampf, of Tenafly, applauds the egalitarian nature of the giving circle – although some women donate more than the required amount, it's always one woman, one vote. "I've done all sorts of philanthropy, and here, what's wonderful is that there's no politics," she says. "This is the first in-my-back-yard experience that I had to give back to this county I've lived in for 16, 17 years." ■

Tickets to the annual meeting of Women United in Philanthropy, Oct. 18 at 6 p.m. at the Stony Hill Inn, cost \$85; visit www.wuip.org or call (201) 291-0601.