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Spirit of St. Louis Women's Fund gives away millions under the radar

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Throwing and Growing

Myrle Mensey, a senior champion shot putter, runs this camp, which teaches girls a variety of skill: table etiquette to physical sports.

There's a little-known group of local women quietly giving away millions of dollars in the St. Louis area. Their 238 members include both outspoken liberals and hardcore Republicans.

They call themselves the Spirit of St. Louis Women's Fund. Together, they've donated more than \$2.5 million since 2007 exclusively to small nonprofits in the metro region. At a time when political divides are fraught, many people's volunteer efforts and charitable giving reflect their ideological values. This makes SOS's stealth philanthropy to a diverse array of causes even more remarkable.

They are part of a "collective giving" trend that has skyrocketed since 2007. The idea is simple. Members recognize that they can make a bigger impact by pooling money and donating larger grants than by giving smaller amounts individually.

Shelby Schagrin brought the idea to St. Louis in 2006 after seeing successful model in San Diego. She recruited her friend Susan Block to join her in trying to launch the same thing here. They started the fund by asking a hundred friends to join them by committing to give \$100 a month for at least a year.

"We didn't want to fund buildings or have big events," Block said. "We just wanted to help people."

At first, they weren't sure whether anyone else would be interested. The organization was designed to fly under the radar. Any woman who commits to the monthly donation can join. There are no other requirements for membership. No one has to sponsor or invite a ne

member. There are no volunteer requirements, although many of the women do become involved with the groups they end up funding. SOS hasn't had a single fundraiser since it started 13 years ago.

"The point is to make it equal," Block said. "Every vote counts the same."

The group solicits grant applications from area nonprofits with operating budgets less than \$1.5 million. They have a team of members who commit to reviewing proposals, doing site visits and going over operating budgets. Then, they put anywhere from 18 to 20 organizations on a ballot and let the members vote on how to divvy up the funds. They've supported more than 80 local organizations with grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$25,000 each.

Becoming better givers

Studies show that women at all income levels give more to charity than men. A 2018 U.S. Trust study found that 93 percent of high net worth women — those earning more than \$200,000 or having a net worth greater than \$1 million minus the value of the home — give to charity, 56 percent volunteer, 6 percent participate in impact investing and 23 percent serve on nonprofit boards. That's compared with 87 percent of male donors and 41 percent of men



Susan Block, right, who co-founded the Spirit of St. Louis Women's Fund in 2006, laughs with Gwendolyn Wesley, an SOS founding member and past president, at the 2019 SC Spirit Awards. Photo by Gretta Forrester

who volunteer. The same gender disparity holds true at lower income levels, and the proliferation of women-led giving circles may be a contributing factor.

Amy Inman, president of SOS, says her giving patterns reflected what other studies have shown: Women tend to give more spontaneously, in group situations and with their hearts, as compared to men. Before she got involved with SOS, she said she would describe herself as a “knee-jerk giver, willing to donate to whoever is asking and whoever you are standing closest to.”

After seven years with SOS, she has learned to become more intentional about her giving, studying how to achieve the best outcomes for the most pressing needs.

Inman, who is self-employed, said she's also discovered causes she never would have known about, and she's developed relationships with women outside her usual circles whom she wouldn't have met otherwise.

She would never have known a champion senior shot putter teaching girls in north St. Louis skills that have earned several of them college scholarships. She met Myrle Mensey, who runs Throwing and Growing in Walnut Park, after SOS funded a summer camp.

She also got to know Julie Williams, who started the Maren Foundation, which gives children with Down Syndrome innovative learning opportunities. And Inman had no idea that MindsEye operated radio programs for the blind in the area.

Spirit of St. Louis does not make donations to political or religious groups. In fact, it tries to avoid conversations about politics or religion altogether, Inman said.

“We talk about issues that are for the good for our community that we can agree upon,” she said.

Local impact

When most people donate money to a cause, they may never see where it goes or the difference it makes. And sometimes, people are nervous about giving to smaller organizations that do not have a long history. The close relationship that SOS develops with many of its grantees allows them to see their impact up close and take pride in smaller organizations' growth.

“We found out about so many organizations in St. Louis that no one had ever heard of,” Block said. Some of the SOS members ended up volunteering with specific grantees or funding additional projects on their own because of the programs they saw firsthand.

Shawntelle Fisher, CEO of the SoulFisher Ministries, is one of their favorite success stories. Her organization serves the needs of youth with incarcerated parents. It helps promote restorative justice for those currently and formerly incarcerated by addressing social and emotional needs, as well as technical and academic skill-building.

Fisher applied for a \$14,000 grant in 2014 when her nonprofit was launching a pilot project. She was formerly incarcerated and struggling to raise money.

Inman said SOS decided to take a “calculated risk” after the members got to know Fisher.



Shawntelle Fisher, founder and executive director of The SoulFisher Ministries, teaches a class to incarcerated women at Women's Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center in Vandalia, Mo. The SoulFisher Ministries, a St. Louis nonprofit working to respond to the needs of youth with incarcerated parents and to promote restorative justice for those currently and formerly incarcerated, is a grantee of the Spirit of St. Louis Women's Fund. Photo courtesy of The SoulFisher Ministries

They gave her \$10,000 in 2015 to help start up the nonprofit.

“The SOS support has really meant a lot,” Fisher said. “They gave us our first substantial grant, and because of that it positioned us for others to take a chance on us.”

Her organization has since blossomed. It received a \$1.5 million grant in 2017 from the Department of Education. She now employs eight full-time staff, 12 part-timers, four AmeriCorps Vis

volunteers and several students from nearby universities. The U.S Department of Justice recently awarded SoulFisher a \$500,000 grant to help assist incarcerated women returning to society.

SOS has funded her organization twice more since the original grant.

“When we approached them again, they answered the call yet again,” Fisher said.

Fisher was so moved by the work SOS does that she joined and became a member herself.

“It just feels great. I’m changing lives in my own community through this network of powerful and compassionate women.”

Five other women whose nonprofits were funded by SOS later ended up joining as members in order to help fund the next round.

“Nobody does anything like a woman,” Fisher said. “Having a whole group of us together is unstoppable.”

For more information, spiritstlwomensfund.org.
