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By Karen Pletsch

Fifteen years ago – nearly to this exact date! – my father Walter Hanson established a donor-advised fund at what was then called the Sangamon County Community Foundation.

The Foundation was only a couple years old at the time, but Dad was drawn to its mission of “connecting people who care with causes that matter.” He most appreciated the wide range of issues and nonprofit organizations supported through the Foundation’s charitable funds and grant programs.

All these years later, and our family is carrying on Dad’s legacy of giving by participating in the annual Community Grants Program.

This program invites nonprofits to voice their greatest immediate needs, be it bricks and mortar projects, programmatic work, general operations, or a myriad of other requests that are submitted to the Foundation through a standard grant application.

In turn, donors with funds at the Community Foundation are invited to review the requests and learn about current local needs.

What makes the Community Grants Program particularly special is the wide range of projects being funded right here in central Illinois. This program is helping food pantries purchase healthier foods, increasing accessibility at historic sites, providing support groups for foster parents, supplying bedding and towels for homeless shelters, and so much more.

Simply put, the Community Grants Program helps my family keep our fingers on the pulse of issues that have long been near and dear to our hearts, and it informs us about new and emerging issues in the community.

Back in 2010, on the heels of the Great Recession, the Community Grants Program was created to provide nonprofits with much-needed support. I was serving on the Foundation’s board of directors at the time, and we knew that immediate financial support for local nonprofits was critical in that moment. Donor-advised funds responded to our call in a remarkable way, banding together to fund 27 different organizations.

This year, the Community Grants Program is poised to pass $500,000 in cumulative grantmaking since its inception.
There’s a similar feeling now, 10 years later, as nonprofits are hurting once again. They aren’t able to run their programs the same way as before, coming up with new ideas to best provide their services while social distancing. That’s why the Community Foundation increased maximum requests from $2,500 to $5,000 and encouraged nonprofits to apply for general operations if that is what they most need in order to survive and thrive beyond the financial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

If you’re interested in local philanthropy, the Foundation’s Community Grants can help you strengthen your bonds with organizations you’ve supported for years and open doors to those you may have only heard of by name.

These are hard times. But it is heartening to know that the Community Foundation continues to provide opportunities to meet local needs where they are in the moment.

Karen Pletsch served as chair of the Community Foundation’s board of directors from 2010 – 2011. To learn more about establishing or donating to donor-advised funds, please contact the Community Foundation at 217.789.4431, or visit us at CFLL.org.