Women’s Foundation Awards Grants to 29 Organizations

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By ERIN WILLIAMS

The Women’s Foundation for a Greater Memphis is awarding $625,000 in grant money to 29 of the city’s organizations that are making a strong impact in the lives of area women.

The Tuesday, Nov. 5, Annual Grants Showcase and Volunteer Recognition event, which is free and open to the public, allows for individuals to speak with representatives from each organization and witness the positive impact in the education, housing and career objectives that each organization has helped to influence.

“Whether it’s employment, education, life skill development ... we fund programs that enable the opportunity for low-income and no-income women to become self-sufficient,” said executive director Ruby Bright of the event, which is in its 15th year. “The overall objective is to ensure that we are addressing those who live at or below the poverty level to help improve the quality of their lives.”

To qualify for a grant, all organizations must qualify for 501(c)(3) status, and their programs that will benefit from the grant must fall in line with one of the foundation’s five thrusts: economic and financial literacy, job readiness and career development, leadership development, nontraditional job training, and entrepreneurship.

The money is rewarded in three increments over the course of the year, which allows the foundation to check in and help ensure their success if tenants within the program need attention and improvement.

Program improvement is what led the New Ballet Ensemble & School to apply for a grant to support their mentorship program this year.

“We have to have a holistic approach,” said CEO and artistic director Katie Smythe. “If we only teach dance, we’re not raising very well-rounded individuals who are going to go out and change the world, perhaps.”

The organization, which received $7,500 this year, has typically designated grants from the Women’s Foundation to providing scholarships, but shifted their focus after realizing that mentoring in addition to proper funding was also important to students’ success.
“The mission is still to provide this excellent dance training, but in order to support students to be successful in obtaining that goal ... we needed to provide the mentoring services to support them,” she said.

Teresa Bernhard, chair of the board for homeownership-focused nonprofit Mi Techo Inc., felt that since the vast majority of their clients were women, applying for a grant from the Women’s Foundation was a perfect match.

“Most of the people buying these houses were women who were single women or the heads of the household making the income,” said the lawyer of the organization, which received $10,000.

Founded by executive director Derna Greenberg, the organization has received three past grants from the foundation, and has been able to help educate nearly 460 women. Greenberg calculates they’ve subsequently made a $13.5 million impact on the local economy.

“The Women’s Foundation actually makes a great investment in us, because we have low overhead and huge impact,” Bernhard said.

There’s also reason for the foundation to celebrate itself this year, as it recently was awarded The Secretary’s Award for Public-Philanthropic Partnerships from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Since partnering with the city of Memphis, the Memphis Housing Authority and Urban Strategies nearly a decade ago to help provide case management to public housing, the foundation has helped secure $88 million in grant funding to renovate and restore select public housing under HUD’s Hope VI housing program.

“We celebrate it and we share it because we want the continued investment to have greater outcomes,” said Bright of their award.

She said she appreciates the recognition, but it’s not about the attention.

“What I know is really, really great is that Leslie Shaw for the first time owns her own car, and she’s creating a better life for herself and the economic impact of her life – and her grandchildren’s life,” she said of just one example of a woman who has been able to create a better life for herself.

“Those are the people that I think about when recognition is brought before us – it’s because we’ve done good work. And if I can’t say that, then it means nothing.”

The 2013 Annual Grants Showcase and Volunteer Recognition will be held at The Columns at One Commerce Square, 40 S. Main St., from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. For more information, visit wfgm.org.