

Meeting the 'Ossen Challenge' for Windham's Women & Girls

The Jeffrey P. Ossen Family Foundation put the 'challenge' in 'challenge grant' for the Windham Area Women & Girls Fund in 2012... and will do so in 2013 and 2014. The first year was a rousing success.

When two representatives from the Windham Area Women & Girls Fund invited Eileen Ossen for lunch, she knew an "ask" was coming.

"Sometimes people just ask me out for lunch," Ossen laughs, "but I knew they were raising money for the fund's endowment."

With a long association, she was happy to hear them out, but, she warned them, she and her late husband decided long ago that the Jeffrey P. Ossen Family Foundation would not make grants to endowments. "We agreed we wanted to see the money used right away," she explains. "I told them I'd think about it."

As she often did while managing Jeffrey's far-reaching businesses, she "stewed" – her words – over the matter for the next few days.

"Then it dawned on me: I could give them the money they use for the year's grants so all the other money they raise could be added to the endowment," Ossen relates.

She added two important twists. First, the grant was a challenge: the foundation would match gifts to the endowment dollar for dollar up to a very generous \$66,000.

Second, the foundation would repeat the challenge

in 2013 and 2014.

If the fund fully meets the three-year challenge – and they succeeded in 2012, Year 1 – the Women & Girls Fund will grow the endowment by \$198,000 and grant an unprecedented \$198,000 to help women and girls in Windham County.

Board greets news with "elation" and "nervousness"

"Our first reaction when we heard Eileen's offer was 'Omigosh, that's terrific; think of what we can accomplish!' remembers Fund Chair Mary Weinland. "It was more than we've ever granted. Plus, we could finally build the endowment towards self sufficiency."

"Then we asked ourselves nervously, 'Can we really raise that much money?' We had never raised more than \$20,000 in a single year.

"So we felt elation about what Eileen's challenge could do, but realism for what needed to get done. That's why they call them 'challenge grants,' I guess," Weinland says.

Ossen, on the other hand, had no doubts about her role.

"We've had a long association," she points out. "Jeff started up the Ossen Fund for the Arts at the [TriCounty



The late Jeffrey P. Ossen and his wife Eileen. "He often said, 'If you empower women, you influence change,'" Eileen remembers.

2012 Windham Area Women & Girls Fund grants

Connecticut Community Care
Eastern Connecticut State University Foundation
Horizons
Windham Region No Freeze Project
Northeast CT Economic Alliance

Nutmeg Big Brothers Big Sisters
Planned Parenthood of Southern New England
Stone Acres Therapeutic Riding Center
Windham Area Interfaith Ministry
Windham County 4-H Foundation

To assist 15-30 low income elderly women
Training in dialogue reading to young children in their first language
Support for families with disabled women and girls
Temporary shelter for homeless women
An event for low income women considering starting a small business or continuing their educations
Mentoring for girls growing up without one or both parents
Preventive reproductive healthcare services in Danielson and Willimantic
Scholarships for women and girls
Support services
Camping for 10-12 Latino girls



Grantee Windham Area Interfaith Ministry (WAIM) offers a 'clothes closet' for women in the region

Area] Community Foundation to bring classical music to grammar school students. I joined the board and became a founder of the Women & Girls Fund. I always went to the breakfasts and was very impressed how every grant stretched the dollars and made a difference. I've always trusted their process and their choices. The Fund's volunteers live here, care about this community, are well informed about the needs of women and girls, and know what programs and services make a positive difference. That's what made my offer easy."

She also credits her husband for inspiring her with his tireless wisdom and compassion for philanthropy. A Tor-

rington native, he started making charitable gifts while a student at UConn, and was planning the foundation she now runs even as he was dying from a rare cancer.

"He also believed strongly in women," Ossen notes. "He often said, 'if you empower women, you influence change.'"

Windham women and girls feeling the results

Thanks to the Ossen Challenge, \$66,000 in gifts from generous donors went directly to the Windham Area Women & Girls Fund endowment.

The Ossen foundation's check for \$66,000, in the meantime, funded an emergency fund

for elderly women living independently; an event to encourage low-income women to start small businesses; and a 4-H camp experience for Latino girls, among 11 significant grants.

"We couldn't be more grateful to Eileen and the foundation," concludes Weinland. "She's amazing, utterly amazing."

"I'm having fun," Ossen replies. "I'm looking forward to Year Two."

To help meet the 2013 Ossen Challenge, please contact Kip Parker at 877-442-3572 or kip@cfect.org.