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## Celebrating 15 years of enriching women, girls

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Early Childhood Collaborative of Southington Director Dr. Mary Yuskis addresses local child care accreditation at the Main Street Community Foundation's Wonder of Women event at the Aqua Turf last Thursday.

By LISA CAPOBIANCO  
STAFF WRITER

Over the past 15 years, the Main Street Community Foundation has helped women and girls realize their potential and the power they have to build strong communities through the Women & Girls' Fund.

For the Early Childhood Collaborative of Southington (ECCS), the fund has helped five Southington women who own and operate family child care businesses to achieve the National Association of Family Child Care (NAFCC) Accreditation. Last year, ECCS received \$4,500 from the Women & Girls' Fund to assist those family child care providers.

To date, Southington has 30 family child care providers, and none have pursued the accreditation, partly due to the cost of achieving it, said Dr. Mary Yuskis, director of ECCS. Yuskis said the cost of the accreditation is \$1,200 per provider.

"These women choose to operate a family child care program from their homes because they enjoy working with young children and need to contribute financially to their families," said Yuskis, adding that only one family child care provider in the state that has achieved and maintained this type of high quality accreditation. "Many of these women also do not have training in early childhood or business management. Like many of their counterparts in the state of Connecticut, none has earned national accreditation to allow them to be at the forefront of the highest levels of quality home-based child care."

ECCS began in 2003 with a dedicated group of individuals invested in the development, growth, and academic success of Southington's children from birth to age eight. With the support and advocacy, ECCS aims to ensure that all Southington children will enter kindergarten healthy and ready to learn. One area of support that ECCS offers is family child care.

Thanks to two grants from the Women & Girls' Fund, ECCS began financially supporting five Southington family child care providers with the 12 to 18 month process for achieving accreditation, said Yuskis.

"When these Southington family child care providers have achieved this accreditation, it will put our community in the forefront of having the most NAFCC-accredited child care providers in the entire state," she said, adding that the program also allowed these five women to develop close relationships.

Established in 2001, the Women & Girls' Fund is a community-based endowment that serves females of all ages in Bristol, Plainville, Southington, Burlington, Plymouth/Terryville and Wolcott. Since its inception, the fund has granted over \$350,000 to over 85 organizations and programs that improve the lives of local women and girls.

The funds for these grants stem from four sources: proceeds of the annual Wonder of Women (WOW) event, the endowment, and two other named funds, including the John & Gloria DiFrancesco Fund for Women and Girls and the Barbara Hackman Franklin Fund for Women.

Last Wednesday, close to 450 people attended the WOW event held at the Aqua Turf to celebrate the 15 years of work that the fund accomplished. The event also celebrated all of the women that were honored through the Fund's special campaign, "A Toast to Women." The faces of mothers, wives, daughters, friends and relatives appeared on a slideshow during the event to acknowledge the positive impact they have made in the lives of others.

Last year, the Women & Girls' Fund distributed a total of \$35,350 in funding for local organizations, such as Chapter 126, Charter Oak State College Foundation, Girl Scouts of Connecticut, the Women & girls' Fund Endowment and the Women & Girls' Immediate Response Fund. Other recipients included Arts for Learning

Connecticut, the Prudence Crandall Center, Plymouth Human Services, Bristol Family Resource Centers and the Boys & Girls Club of Bristol Family Center.

In 2001, the Women & Girls' Fund had a goal of growing its endowment to \$500,000. To date, the fund is more than 90 percent there.

Through the "First 500 Challenge," local donors have the opportunity to help the fund meet its endowment goal. Dawn Nielsen, chair of the Women & Girls' Fund Advisory Board, announced that anonymous donors contributed \$15,000 to help reach the endowment goal.

Nielsen said any donation would help "meet the challenge and realize the vision set forth by the original founders of the Women & Girls' Fund."

Sponsored by Barnes Group, Inc., MassMutual Financial Group and Walmart of Bristol, the WOW event featured WFSB Emmy Winning Television Personality Kara Sundlun. Sundlun also is the author of the book, "Finding Dad: From 'Love Child' to Daughter," which tells the story of her of meeting her biological father Bruce Sundlun when she was a teenager and he was the governor of Rhode Island.

Raised by a single mother, Sundlun said her father was a part of who she was, and did whatever it took to meet him. Despite many unanswered letters, Sundlun ultimately met her father, and learned to forgive him. When she moved to Providence at just about 18 years old, Sundlun developed a relationship with her father, and met her three brothers, who are still a major part of her life today.

Sundlun's father passed away four years ago.

"It is never too late to heal," said Sundlun. "Forgiveness allows you to let go and own who you really are. Owning your story means owning the bad, the scary, the ugliest, the tough."

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