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# WOW event celebrates 16 years of empowerment

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The Main Street Community Foundation's 16th Annual Wonder of Women event saw a crowd of over 400 people last Tuesday to the Aqua Turf —where stories of empowerment echoed throughout the room.

A fundraiser that supports the annual grant cycle of the foundation's Women & Girls' Fund, the WOW event brought together folks from all walks of life under one roof to celebrate a record \$42,570 in grants that 15 local programs and organizations received last year to help women and girls from the Central Connecticut area gain the skills they need to lead successful lives.

Grants from the fund are made possible by proceeds from the WOW event and two other funds: the Barbara Hackman Franklin Fund for Women and the John & Gloria DiFrancesco

Fund for Women & Girls. But since three additional named funds at the foundation supported proposals submitted to the Women & Girls' Fund, the total amount of grant awards for these organizations was \$45,465.



Nationally recognized chef Silvia Baldini shares her secret ingredients for success during the 16th Annual WOW Event.

Two Southington-based organizations were among the 2016 grantees: the Early Childhood Collaborative of Southington and Southington Valley Midget Football.

ECCS received a \$4,500 grant to enhance the development of young children in music and movement by providing training and supplies to Southington family childcare providers while SVMFL received a \$3,250 grant to provide safety head gear for Southington girls in the Powder Puff football program.

Other organizations that serve the Southington community received grant funding last year, including Chapter 126 Sports & Fitness and For Goodness Sake.

For Chapter 126, receiving a \$1,600 grant from the fund meant continuing the Beautiful U Project—a program that has allowed local middle-school aged girls with and without disabilities to realize their inner strength while developing a sense of community.

Over the course of 12 weeks, these girls work on positive self-esteem through classroom activities, sports/fitness activities and team-building skills.

Chapter 126 Adapted Sports Program Coordinator Paul Weiland said seeing the growth of these girls shows “how much one person or a handful of people can do to really open somebody’s eyes.”

“Over time, they’ve really developed that sense of community...that allows them to be a strong unit, and then use that unity to build a strong self-image,” said Weiland, noting the positive impact that journaling has made for the program’s participants.

That sense of community also resonated with Jean Baron who saw firsthand how the support from strangers made a difference for her daughter and granddaughter just several weeks ago. Noting how heartbroken she felt to see her daughter move into an empty apartment, Baron sought help from For Goodness Sake, a volunteer-run non-profit that serves people from Bristol, Southington, and other surrounding towns who are making the transition to independent living and are in need due to certain life situations.

When she stepped inside For Goodness Sake for the first time, Baron said she immediately felt love—and no judgment. With the help of the non-profit, which provides furniture and other household items, Baron was able to make her daughter’s apartment complete.

For Goodness Sake received a \$1,200 grant from the fund to support women like Baron’s daughter who need additional assistance to buy items not provided by the warehouse.

“It’s such an amazing experience,” said Baron, with her granddaughter standing by her side at the WOW event. “I wake up every morning knowing she has a beautiful apartment because of the kindness of the people at For Goodness Sake and everyone there.”

Noting how the non-profit is rooted in “dignity and passion,” Kendra Morales, the executive director of For Goodness Sake, said the fund helped launch this “Welcome Home Program,” which provides clients with starter kits equipped with items like fresh seats and towels and a microwave.

“It’s those little things we take for granted that we don’t even think about that really make your home...a safe place to be,” said Morales.

From domestic violence to homelessness to the transition to addiction recovery, For Goodness Sake works with partner agencies to provide a second chance for individuals under a variety of circumstances.

“There’s so many scenarios we go through over and over that we get to be part of the frontlines with. We couldn’t do it without grants and without the work that happens in the community,” said Morales.

Established in 2001, the Women & Girls’ Fund is a community-based, permanent endowment of the Main Street Community Foundation that supports programs that work to improve the conditions and opportunities for females of all ages in Bristol, Burlington, Plainville, Plymouth, Southington, and Wolcott. Since its inception, the fund has awarded nearly \$400,000 in grants and immediate response support.

Among the other 2016 grantees included: Bristol Youth Lacrosse, Environmental Learning Centers of Connecticut, Inc., Chippens Hill Middle School, Wheeler Clinic, Imagine Nation, A Museum Early Learning Center, Boys & Girls Club and Family Center of Bristol, Bristol Youth Services, Literacy Volunteers of Central Connecticut, Prudence Crandall Center, Plymouth Family Resource Center, and The Children’s Museum.

Besides local women and girls, the WOW event also celebrated the empowerment of the first professional woman chef in Connecticut to win the Food Network’s, “Chopped”: Silvia Baldini. The nationally recognized chef, business owner and activist served as a guest speaker during the event where she shared her secret ingredients for success.

By following her passion and believing in her talents, Baldini went from art director to the champion of “Chopped,” where Chef Chris Santos declared her dessert as “the best dessert on this show ever.”

During her culinary career, she worked at Michelin-star kitchens in Europe, the Ritz Carlton in London, and Ottolenghi. Baldini also founded Strawberry and Sage—a culinary “think tank” that provides catering in New Canaan, Conn.

“I learned how to use skills in life—I learned how to use ingredients,” said Baldini, who was born in Italy where she was inspired by her parents to learn the art of cooking. “We all get talents, and we have to learn to use them—we have to learn to adapt and go for it.”

One of 16 chefs to compete in the last season of “Chopped Champions,” Baldini also has appeared on local and national TV shows. Outside the kitchen, the wife and mother of two is the writer of “Silvia’s Trays,” a blog for women about fresh, modern, and power-loaded recipes. She also teaches and gives back to the community.

“One step at a time, you go in the direction you want to go towards,” said Baldini, who told the crowd that women can ‘have it all.’ “You set a goal and you are a tank—you go and you don’t stop.”

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