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FAIRFIELD

## Fairfield Community Foundation celebrates 15 years

By Eric Robinette

Staff Writer

**FAIRFIELD** — The Fairfield Community Foundation celebrates 15 years of giving this year, but the success of the organization is reflected in larger numbers, with more than \$3.5 million in assets and more than 70 different scholarships it awards.

That's a high number for a foundation of Fairfield's size, said its president, Diane Ruder.

"The thing that I think is so impressive about our scholarships and about our foundation is that we are really made up of funds given by what I call ordinary people. That's kind of unique ... a lot of other foundations have much of their funding coming from one or two families of means," she said. "We really have a lot of traditional people who say 'I want to give a scholarship in memory of someone because I think it's important.'"

The Crystal Ball, which was rescheduled from Saturday night to March 28, also served as the organization's annual meeting and was a reference to the fact that crystal is the gift for a 15th anniversary.

"We thought the idea of looking to the past, the present and the future was a good way to take a look at the foundation's 15 years and celebrate our birthday, so to speak," Ruder said.

The foundation began when a group of Fairfield residents, including Howard Dirksen, Richard Niehaus, Jim Miller and Joe Schwarz, got together in 1998 and began discussing ways they could make a difference in the community.

"That would allow them to impact all different segments of our community from scholarships, all the way through ordinary needs of individuals, and social service agencies, where we give our grants," Ruder said.

Eventually, the foundation grew so much that it has awarded more than \$3 million in scholarships since its inception.

"During the early years, that group of people gave a challenge to business people and other individuals in the community and asked them to set up funds with the foundation at a minimum of \$5,000. People were asked to give the money outright or pledge that amount. Then the fund would be named after they achieved the gift level," said Ruder.

In the first week, 16 people responded to set up those funds.

"It really was an effort on the part of those original founding members to involve the community in lots of ways ... we now have 120 funds (built) over a number of years," Ruder said.

Scholarships also became a key component of the foundation after Fairfield City Schools turned the management of several of them over to the foundation. That became the base of the endowed scholarships the organization gives out. They range from the school district to families who set up scholarships to honor the memory of a loved one.

The foundation has also been instrumental in helping the charitable efforts of the Nuxhalls. The family of the late Reds broadcaster and player Joe Nuxhall have contributed to Fairfield in several ways, including the Nuxhall scholarships and the Joe Nuxhall Miracle League, which presents a specially designed baseball field for players with special needs.

"We have all the legacy projects of dad's over there," said Nuxhall's son Kim. That goes all the way back to the scholarship fund Joe Nuxhall himself first established in the 80s. With the Miracle League fields, "they were a big part of helping us with the process, taking care of a lot of the paperwork and the behind-the-scenes type-stuff," Nuxhall said.

"We really didn't know anything about nonprofits. They gave us the guidance and helped us set the foundation for our work. They've been there and done that, and if it wasn't for them, I think we'd still be struggling," he said.

The first winner of the Joe Nuxhall scholarship was Diana Watkins-Gilbert, a 1989 graduate of Fairfield High School. The award of her scholarship predates the foundation, but the organization has had Watkins-Gilbert come to its functions as a local success story. Watkins-Gilbert lived with a single mom who would not have been able to afford college for her. Now she's an optometrist with practices in West Chester Twp. and Clifton.

"I had always said it was a confidence booster about what I had to offer," she said of her scholarship. "It provided opportunities and opened doors for me. Now I look at it as recognition of potential leadership, and an opportunity to give back," she said.

Having firmly established its roots, the foundation is now formulating a new strategic planning process to collaborate with other organizations to find more ways to help the community, and to raise more awareness about how the foundation works. Coming full circle, the creators of Fairfield's foundation have funded a new software program that will allow the foundation to be more responsive to fund-holder's needs.

"The most important thing that we have to do is to help people understand that almost anybody can set up a fund if they so desire. So what we really want to do is expand our presence in the community so people are more aware of their opportunities to make a difference in people's lives," said Ruder.