Involving Youth in Philanthropy – Grant Professionals Can Make a Difference

Wednesday, September 12, 2012

Contributed By Diane H. Leonard
Published By CharityChannel

As we went around the table, the responses to “What is philanthropy?” were as diverse as the participants sitting with me. Note that I wasn’t facilitating a roundtable amongst professionals in the grant making or grant seeking field. Rather, more than a decade ago, I was sitting at a table with sixteen teenage girls facilitating a new program year’s kick-off meeting of Young Women for Change.

It is one type of professional challenge to serve as a program officer that is responsible for managing the grant-making process for the grant committees, keeping track of grantee reports and outcomes, etc. It is another to describe our profession—explaining philanthropy from the ground level and describing how local and regional grant making fits into global philanthropy. Now that was a different challenge all together, albeit a gratifying one.

Throughout the year long program, the teens were always willing to question a grant making process or decision. They wanted to better understand how each step of the process or decision would ultimately help or impact the final grant or grantee outcome. It was extremely refreshing yet challenging to formulate answers as to the how, what, and why related to basic grant making processes.

Working with a group of youth that was in many cases split between those looking at their community through optimistic rose colored glasses and those feeling that the challenges their generation faced were mammoth was certainly interesting. Individual and group perceptions most definitely impacted their discussions and decisions related to approving grant requests. Clearly, the common thread amongst the participants was not their academic passion, sports focus, or socio economic status. Instead, the common thread was their commitment and passion to help improve their community.

Their initial and diverse responses to “What is philanthropy?” slowly converged as the group spent the year together focusing on grant making and the specific needs of their community. The individual views of each participant continued to shape their definition of philanthropy and their understanding of how, despite them, they could come together to shape change within their community. Their ability to make joint decisions brought forth the commonalities in their definition of philanthropy and grant making.

There are multiple models that are followed in the implementation of youth philanthropy groups–some groups only grant to youth-led projects in their target community, others
only support nonprofit groups that are implementing projects specifically addressing the
needs of the youth in the community. Just as each foundation has its own process and set
of priorities, so is often the case with youth philanthropy groups. The beauty is that as in
the case of foundations, there is not necessarily a clear right or wrong answer. The
importance is the process of community engagement and decision making that the youth
participates in during the grant making process.

This year, the Michigan Youth Advisory Councils are celebrating their 20th anniversary
of engaging youth in philanthropy. A Youth Advisory Council (YAC) is defined in
Michigan as a youth grant making body of a community foundation which has a
permanently endowed youth fund. The programs have grown so that now nearly 1,900
young people are involved in YACs annually. YACs in Michigan can attribute their start
and growth to the support of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, as can Young Women for
Change. The energy and enthusiasm for grant making and community change that these
programs create is palpable when these groups come together for annual conferences.

There are countless benefits to youth to participate in a leadership exercise such as a
community focused youth philanthropy group. A few of the key benefits that I saw
through evaluations and personal observations of participants were that participation in
youth philanthropy groups teaches youth:

- To build a case and advocate for their beliefs;
- To learn to be responsible stewards of money;
- To learn different ways to be generous within a community; and
- To become tomorrow’s leaders/philanthropists.

The youth that are willing to be engaged in these unique programs (such as Young
Women for Change, Youth Advisory Councils, or Youth Philanthropy Councils) are
those that will likely remain engaged in the nonprofit sector on varying levels over their
lifetimes. These youth are also some of the community leaders that may, down the road,
be in the position to consider starting a donor-advised fund or their own family
foundation.

I firmly believe that engaging today’s youth in philanthropy (specifically grant making)
can make a significant difference for their communities in the future—for it is critical that
we continue to build sustainable and engaged communities that can and will support
future philanthropic needs. I anticipate that as these youth are tracked, the data will show
how their understanding of philanthropy as a youth positively impacts their long term
community involvement and philanthropy.

I recently had the pleasure of interviewing an applicant from my alma mater who
happened to have participated in a local youth philanthropy group. While our
conversation was a typical college alumna style “interview,” the stories and experiences
shared during our conversation clearly articulated how participation in the Youth
Philanthropy Council had altered her view of the community.
After the interview as I walked away from the coffee shop, I could not help but feel affirmed in my belief that we must teach our children and youth about what philanthropy means and the role that grant making plays in all of our communities—it is part of our duty as those working in the grant profession and engaged community members.

So the next time you have an opportunity to involve youth in your work, please think of the future. Invite and encourage them to actively participate in whatever way they can, even if not in a formal youth philanthropy program. Give them responsibilities and specific roles to play. You can make a difference—in the lives of today’s youth and in the future of your town or state’s philanthropic community.