



Three of the 14 hard-working members of the Southeastern discretionary grants committee review some of the 113 applications area nonprofits submitted this year. Most will get site visits too. From left to right: Kathy Parker, Committee Chair Valerie Grimm, and Art Tanner.

# Your neighbors put their stamp on competitive grants

**V**alerie Grimm and Art Tanner have very important jobs at the Community Foundation. Wearing their CFECT “hats”, they are welcomed as VIPs by almost any nonprofit in southeast Connecticut. And they and their colleagues play a key role in directing hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants to those same organizations.

Yet Grimm and Tanner have no cubicle at the Community Foundation, no health care, no retirement plan, indeed, no salary. They are the “community” in Community Foundation.

## Volunteers “staff” major grants programs

Grimm is chair and Tanner a second year member of the 14-member Southeastern Connecticut Grants Committee. Similar committees exist for Norwich and Windham, for scholarships, and for the four Women & Girls Funds, says Program Director Jennifer O’Brien.

“Some of it is economics,” she explains. “We have a very small staff to handle millions of dollars of requests.

“But more importantly,” she adds, “it’s a philosophical decision. We’re a community organization, and our decisions are made by members of the community.”

Valerie Grimm agrees. “Who better to count on than your fellow citizens? Contributors and fundholders can feel secure that their funds are distributed with proper vetting by caring, compassion people just like themselves.”

## Step 1: “All things considered”

A glance at the 2012 discretionary grants for southeast Connecticut shows a rich diversity among arts & culture, education & civic affairs, and social services & health.

“We don’t pit one issue against another, say a dance program versus homelessness,” says Grimm. “Each project is considered on its own merits. Anybody who has an idea, a program, or an aspiration can write a proposal, and we’ll take a look at it. There’s a beauty to that. I think.

“Truth is, one of the most exciting results of this open attitude is we frequently discover a whole panoply of organizations that we never knew about. I say to myself, ‘Wow, a lot of people are doing good things in eastern Connecticut!’”

## Discovering magic on the site visit

Art Tanner, who ran a packaging manufacturing company for 30 years, went on his first site visits last year. He was armed with the Community Foundation’s 12-point questionnaire, the nonprofit’s application, budgets, and plenty of paperwork. But the site visit made all the difference.

“You hear their passion, why they believe in their mission, and personal stories when you meet face to face,” Tanner says. “You can’t get that from the paper application.”

Grimm agrees. “An application is fairly sterile. The words on the paper, even written by the most eloquent writer, are no substitute for the sight, the taste, and the

smell, of visiting someone in action. Otherwise, we’d be evaluating the program by who has the best writer.

“At site visits, I always ask, ‘what can you tell me that you couldn’t put down on paper?’ And no one has ever answered, ‘Well, gee, nothing.’”

Tanner mentions visiting a dynamic nonprofit that he had walked by for years.

“I visited an exciting program this year whose core program is vocational services for folks with special needs. It has an art gallery and transitional programs. The same woman has been running it for 27 years. It’s right next to my dry cleaners; I had no idea what they were doing.

“That’s the fun of being in my second year on the committee. I get to watch new

people come back from their site visits so excited about someone they talked to, about becoming aware of the breadth of what’s out there.

“You feel good about what’s going on in the community”

## The final step: choosing grantees

Both Grimm and Tanner describe the final choice of grantees as cooperative and congenial.

“It’s fairly easy to reach consensus,” says Tanner. “People make a good case for the nonprofits they were assigned, whether ‘yes’, ‘no’, or ‘maybe’. We usually only have a ‘tug of war’ over one or two.”

Grimm adds, “Alice (Fitzpatrick) and Jennifer set the stage for us. We warn the nonprofits to have reasonable expectations.”

Despite the caution, and thanks to \$240,000 in additional dollars from donor advisors (see page xx), Grimm’s committee was able to choose 87 projects and distribute \$625,000 in 2012.

“Not bad for ‘average Joes’ off the street, just like you,” she laughs.

*“One of the most exciting results of an open attitude is we discover a whole panoply of organizations that we never knew about,” reports Committee Chair Valerie Grimm. “I say to myself, ‘Wow, a lot of people are doing good things in eastern Connecticut.’”*

*We talk with Valerie Grimm and Art Tanner, two of dozens of volunteers who help choose the best nonprofits and projects to fund each year. It’s a win-win situation for all involved.*

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