Foundation keeps eye on preservation, youth

Warner Theatre, RoboticS group among causes

BY CONOR GRIFFITH
The Dominion Post

The achievements of the ventures of the nonprofit Your Community Foundation (YCF) aren't always obvious but can be seen throughout Monongalia County.

YCF itself is a fairly young organization, having formed in 2011 through a merger of the Greater Morgantown Community Trust and the Community Foundation of North Central West Virginia. While YCF continues its endeavors, the projects it started have had lasting effects.

Ron Justice, who served as Morgantown mayor from 2002-'09, said the Greater Morgantown Community Trust was instrumental in financing the land that became Dorsey's Knob Park.

"We had really good leadership at the trust. It (the property) was originally going to be sold to a big box retailer," he said, adding that the county, city and trust were able to work out a deal in which the retailer stayed in Mon County and the lodge at Dorsey's Knob was built.

Preservation projects aren't slowing down. In early May, YCF president Nick Austin said a group of citizens started a fund with the foundation with the purpose of preserving the Warner Theatre on High Street, which closed in 2010 after more than 78 years of operation.

There's still more work to be done. Austin said the theater will have to re-brand itself as a nonprofit in order to re-open, so it remains to be seen what will become of the theater. But it's a start, he said.

In late 2013, YCF joined ongoing efforts to raise money for the creation of a bronze statue honoring local legend Don Knotts. Austin said the $50,000 fundraising goal was attained, and the statue will be placed outside the Metropolitan Theatre, another of YCF's partnerships.

The Metropolitan Theatre Preservation Foundation has a fund with YCF that was valued at $48,000 in November.

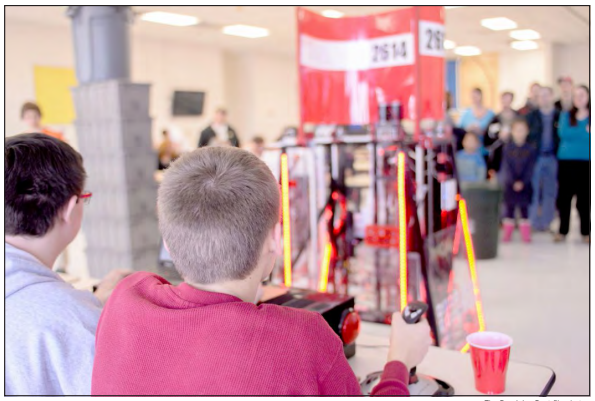
YCF also manages funds that make the operation of youth organizations possible.

Mountaineer Area RoboticS (MARS), which was established in 2008, sends local high school students to robotics competitions all over the country. Phillip Tucker, one of the group's coaches, said this was possible thanks to a fund maintained by YCF.

Morgantown High School senior Annie Levdansky said she found her calling through the group. She said she'll soon attend WVU and major in mechanical engineering.

"I'd really be lost without MARS," she said. "I had no idea what I was going to do. I tried sports and anything to find my clique as teenagers often do."

Tucker said the importance of MARS goes beyond building robots — it's about helping young people find their passion, and the partnership with YCF has been very valuable in making that happen.



The Dominion Post file photos

Ethan Scime (left) and Kevin Tennant navigate MARVIN VIII during an open house for the Mountaineer Area RoboticS (MARS) at Mountaineer Middle School. Your Community Foundation (YCF) manages a fund for the group that allows it to send students to competitions all over the country.





According to former Morgantown mayor Ron Justice, a predeccessor of the YCF, Greater Morgantown Community Trust, was able to help the city and Monongalia County work out a deal that led to the construction of the Dorsey's Knob lodge. Empty Bowls, which hosts an annual soup luncheon compete with a bowl for participants to keep, is one of several nonprofits in the region to have a fund managed by the foundation.

YCF

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based on High Street, works in partnership with other like-minded groups on a variety of projects. YCF also manages endowment funds that grow and accumulate interest, allowing them to grow.

Your Community Foundation manages more than $12 million worth of investment funds from 170 other nonprofit organizations in Monongalia, Marion, Preston, Taylor and Harrison counties.

YCF was established in 2011 through a merger of the Greater Morgantown Community Trust and the Community Foundation of North Central West Virginia in 2011. In January, YCF was recognized as nonprofit of the year by the Morgantown Area Chamber of Commerce.

"Banks don't want to touch you unless you can have $10,000 in funds," said Sally Harman, president of Taylor County Community Funds (TCCF), a group that provides assistance to Boy and Girl Scout troops, food pantries and backpack programs in Taylor County.

Harman said she once had a fund set up with a local bank, but was asked to close the account because it did not exceed the desired dollar amount. After that, she went to YCF, which specializes in managing endowment funds for smaller nonprofits.

Harman said the accumulated interest in her group's fund is used to give out two $250 scholarships or one $500 scholarships to local students every year, while the rest of the TCCF's money remains secure.

"It's a tree you plant," Harman said, adding that the endowment fund with Your Community Foundation ensures small groups such as hers will keep running after the founders have moved on to other endeavors.

Mike Argabrite represents the Scott Argabrite Foundation. The Kingwood-based nonprofit was established in 2007 in memory of Mike's son, Scott, to help the young people of Preston County. One of the group's ongoing projects is the establishment of an indoor sports complex for use during inclement weather.

Argabrite said plans for the new building have been drawn up and possible sites have been examined.

"We have about three locations, and we're looking to see which one will suit the community best," he said, adding that YCF has been managing funding on the project. He said YCF was chosen as an investment site because it showed the most potential for further growth.

Corey Farris, the chairman of Empty Bowls Monongalia, said his group also has an endowment fund with YCF to combat hunger in Mon County.

Throughout the years, Empty Bowls' donations have grown from a few hundred dollars a year to tens of thousands. Thanks to its partnerships, Empty Bowls is able to support more than 20 local food banks, Farris said.

"We've become a coordinating point for people in the community," he said, adding that a multitude of businesses and individuals come together to make the annual Empty Bowls Luncheon a reality.

"We evolve to meet the needs of the region," said Nick Austin, president of Your Community Foundation. "The biggest question a lot of these groups ask is 'Are we going to be here next year?' "

Austin said there are a lot of people out there with great ideas to give back to their communities. Unfortunately, many don't act on them because of the perceived enormity and complexity of getting it done.

"You don't have to be a multimillionaire to be philanthropic," he said.

YCF takes a personal approach with potential partners, walking them through the steps face-to-face. The foundation also helps donors obtain their 501(c)(3) categorization, which allows their organizations to be exempt from federal income taxes.

Austin said it can be a challenge juggling so many funds from so many different groups, but that it's a good challenge to rise to. He also said having so many nonprofits coming together and working in concert with each other, businesses and government entities can transform the region into a powerhouse within the Mountain State.

And the best of times are yet to come. Austin said the foundation will soon launch a campaign intended to double funds of its partner organizations.

"We're going to work out a program that's designed to help our current endowment funds be able to go and raise money with some guaranteed matched money from us to grow their endowment funds," he said. "It'll be a long campaign stretching from June into next spring."

Austin said no other details regarding this campaign would be provided until a conference in late June.



Ron Rittenhouse/The Dominion Post

Mike Argabrite (left), with the Scott Argabrite Foundation; Bill Hennessey, executive director of The Foundation at Mon General; and Julie Sole, executive director of the Disability Action Center in Fairmont, talk with Your Community Foundation President Nicholas Austin. All are nonprofits that work with YCF.

NONPROFIT PROGRAMS

Your Community Foundation provides charities with the vehicle to grow their capacity to improve lives through its nonprofit program. Through this effort the foundation helps strengthen charitable organizations by helping them build endowment assets. The following organizations partnered with YCF in this program:

- American Red Cross Laurel Chapter
- Arts Monongahela
- Bartlett House Inc.
- Clarksburg-Harrison Cultural Foundation
- Empty Bowls Monongalia
- Fort New Salem Foundation
- Job Squad
- Labor of Love Ministries Inc.
- Main Street Fairmont
- Marion County Historical Society
- Metropolitan Theatre Foundation
- Milan Puskar Health Right
- Mon General Foundation
- Mon River Trails Conservancy
- Mon Valley Green Space Coalition Inc.
- Morgantown Public Library Systems
- Morgantown Library System Endowment
- Morgantown Library System Fund
- Morgantown Theatre Company
- Mountain Heart Foundation Fund
- United Way of Monongalia and Preston Counties
- United Way of Harrison County
- Valley Comprehensive Community Mental Health Center Inc.
- West Virginia Black Heritage Festival

SOURCE: ycfwv.org

FIVE FACTS

- Your Community Foundation (YCF) is a fairly young organization, having been formed through a merger of the Greater Morgantown Community Trust and the Community Foundation of North Central West Virginia in 2011.
- YCF manages more than $12 million of investment funds from 170 groups in five counties — Monongalia, Marion, Preston, Taylor and Harrison.
- Precursors to the YCF helped keep the WVU rifle team afloat at a time when it was dropped by the university in 2003. The YCF funds allowed the team to compete until funding was restored years later.
- The foundation helps small, newly founded charitable organizations attain nonprofit status, allowing donations to stream in tax-exempt.
- YCF maintains endowment funds for the preservation of some historic landmarks in north-central West Virginia.