

P E T A L U M A
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Important Petaluma issues in 2016

By Ariana Reguzzonifor

The Petaluma Educational Foundation (PEF) has a few goals for 2016. They'd like to expand their partnerships with local businesses. They'd like to receive more donations of high-quality furniture and designer-label clothing at their Alphabet Soup Thrift Store on Western Ave. And, perhaps most ambitiously, they'd like every single person in Petaluma to donate something, no matter how small.

"Every student counts, so every dollar counts," said Maureen Highland, executive director of PEF since 2014. "Imagine what that would translate to for our schools and students."

It's an ambitious goal, but so far, over the 33-year course of PEF's existence, the community has come together to make it one of the most enduring non-profit organizations in the Petaluma.

"We have longevity and transparency that provides people a confidence," said Highland. "They will truly see an impact in their community."

PEF was created in 1982 because of a collective need identified by a group of community members. Throughout all of Petaluma's 16 school districts, the state's funding cuts to arts and music education were having a real impact. These community members decided to take action and form PEF to help engage the community to support their schools and, ultimately, steward these gifts into meaningful curriculum-based grants and scholarships. The organization has never received public funding and, to this day, relies solely on support from individuals, corporations and foundations.

PEF still supports art and music programs, like a recent production of "A Christmas Carol" at the Mystic Theater for over 900 students, but donations now also go towards a myriad of other subjects.

If a donor has a passion for something, like agriculture or technology, they can be paired with a grant that will support it, said Highland. In fact, each grant is born out of the educators' innovations and creativity and reflect needs that teachers see from their classrooms.

PEF supports educational opportunities ranging from math and science to filmmaking and outdoor kitchens. Teachers apply for PEF's Impact Grant Program in October and the "top tier" of applicants deliver detailed presentations to the 27-member Board of Directors. Highland said it's important that these proposals come directly from the educators.

"We needed to really know what they needed," she said.

She explained that, while "everyone has a connection to a school," the staff and Board of PEF are not educators. They merely have "the privilege to fundraise on their behalf," said Highland.

Petaluma is a close-knit community that is very generous when it comes to supporting schools and youth, Highland explained. About three or four years ago, Highland and longtime PEF Program Director Katy Verke, decided to brainstorm about how best to reach out to local businesses, knowing that many of them had philanthropic goals.

This resulted in meaningful partnerships between PEF and many small, and not so small, businesses in town.

For example, order an “Amer the Gamer” sandwich at Lucchesi’s Deli (named after local Giants report, Amy G.) and a portion of the proceeds from the cheddar and roast beef concoction go to PEF. The same deal applies to the “S’Mores” package at Nick’s Cove in Tomales. And Clover Stornetta, Petaluma Market and the Petaluma Health Care District have jumped in to support PEF as well, though on an even larger scale as part of an annual program of giving \$30,000 to the organization.

Highland said this is a key example of how the community values investing in the next generation.

“These are the people who are going to lead our community in the future,” said Highland of the students PEF supports.

With this future in mind, PEF also runs a comprehensive scholarship program. This year they received a record 337 applications and were able to award 242 students, totaling \$224,375. This money will help pay for two- or four-year colleges or vocational school for high school seniors graduating from Petaluma High Schools. There are a variety of different types of scholarships available and, starting in January, students will be able to apply online for the specific opportunities that meet their education and career goals.

These scholarships have the ability to support students for whatever they plan to do, Highland explained. For example, in 1999, a popular Petaluma High School teacher, Shirley MacIvain, established a scholarship with the broad decree that it is for students “who wish to pursue any kind of further education.” The gift of her estate, worth over \$1 million, will benefit generations of students.

But even \$10 will help, Highland said. And while the scholarships are specific to certain donors, PEF pools all other donations to support their grant programs. In 2015, they awarded 23 grants, totaling over \$186,000. Since 1983, they have awarded \$2.9 million dollars to 21 public and private not-for-profit schools in Petaluma.

There are other non-financial opportunities to help too. Highland said they always need volunteers to staff the Alphabet Soup Thrift Store, which operates separate clothing and home boutiques seven days a week. In addition, every year they seek out a unique home, barn or place to pitch a tent for their annual fundraising gala, the PEF Bash, that includes a gourmet dinner, live and silent auctions and entertainment.

Despite the mercurial nature of education funding in California, PEF has been able to ensure a consistent stream of support for local schools. In fact, they have been around long enough to recruit their first second-generation board member. But, as Highland explained, the only way they can maintain their role as a significant supporter of local education is to continue to be supported by the community.

“The value of engaging a student to learn in the way that’s best for them,” Highland said, “I don’t know how you could top that kind of gift.”

(Contact Ariana Reguzzoni at argus@arguscourier.com.)