

Rhode Island Spotlight: The General Federation of Women's Clubs of South County



From a horse rescue operation in Saunderstown to the restoration of an historic grist mill in South Kingstown to a rolling library run by volunteers and a home repair program that helps elderly residents stay in their homes — the impact has been deep and wide across the southern part of Rhode Island the past five decades.

These programs and many more are all supported by The General Federation of Women's Clubs of South County, part of a worldwide federation founded in 1890 with a focused mission of improving local communities and the lives of women through volunteer service. Their motto: *Live The Volunteer Spirit*.

Last year, the South County chapter, which was founded more than 50 years ago, quietly distributed \$18,000 in grants to nearly two dozen non-profit organizations, supplemented by hundreds of hours of volunteer work from close to 90 club members.



“All of our members are required to, and do, give of themselves. So to be a member you have to be willing to roll up the sleeves and help,” said Diana Crane, who joined the club more than 15 years ago and is the chairman of the GROW Hope committee, which decides annually which grants to award.

“The last couple of years we've had people applying for triple the amount of money we have,” Crane said. “I have a spreadsheet, and I put on it a brief description of each of the organizations and what they're asking for. Then we sit down and discuss and barter a bit until we get it down to the number we have to have.”

Locally the club has supported Horseplay, a rescue organization that has taken in dozens of abused, neglected and unwanted horses, letting them live out their lives in Saunderstown. Also receiving support is Neighbors Helping Neighbors, based in Charlestown, which makes repairs for low-income and elderly residents of South County who might not otherwise be able to stay in their homes.

Neighbors covers everything, including materials and labor.



Sheryl Peno found the club gives out more than just the organizational grants. Peno, a single mom of three, was working at Brightview Senior Living in Wakefield and trying to earn her bachelor's degree from URI. She had everything covered except for one crucial item.

"I just wanted a computer and help paying for books," she said. "And that was huge to me, because I had spent so much time out of the house. My kids were young and trying to help me with laundry and cooking. It was hard for me to help them with their homework while I was trying to get my homework done; if I didn't have a computer I had to go to the library."

With help from the club's scholarship, Peno went on to earn her degree and has worked her way up to being the community sales director at Brightview.



Once a month, two club members meet at the South Kingstown Public Library to volunteer for the Rolling Library program. By the end of the day they will have distributed a month's worth of reading material to eight largely homebound people. Judy Babcock is one of seven volunteers and has been with the program since it began 15 years ago. "It was a project that the women's club took on because they were realizing in the communities of Narragansett and South Kingstown that homebound seniors didn't have access to library services. They came up with the idea of a mobile library," she said.

Librarian Jessica Wilson picks out the books, based on a questionnaire each recipient fills out about reading preferences. Wilson has jumped in on occasion to help with the deliveries. "It's wonderful to go and visit people with something to talk about that doesn't have to do with, 'How are you feeling?' and, 'What is your care?' You just talk with them like a regular person," she said.

Crane says the feedback she and other club members get is incredible. "When somebody comes up with a smile and says thank you, we never would have been able to fund this program without the women's club's help."

If you want to see the video version of this story go to www.RhodeIslandSpotlight.org. If you know of a

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