

The Columbus Dispatch

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Giving like never before

Donors channel caring via Columbus Foundation

Wednesday, March 21, 2007 3:36 AM

BY RITA PRICE
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

The little girl looked up from the picture she was drawing and considered the request.

"Tell me who you're missing," asked Ann DiMarco, a hospice volunteer.

"My mom," the 7-year-old said. "She died six weeks ago from breast cancer, and I really miss her."

After a few minutes of gentle conversation, the girl finished her altered family portrait: Two kids and a dad, with the mom floating protectively above.

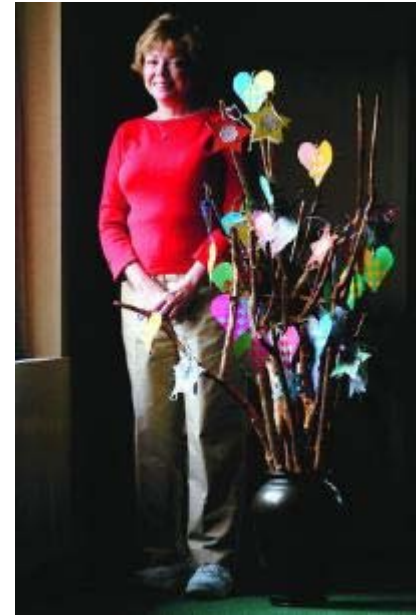
DiMarco went to the kitchen and had a good cry.

She eventually wrote a \$25,000 check, too.

"Once my husband and I knew that we were secure, we really wanted to start giving back," said DiMarco, who created a fund through the Columbus Foundation to support bereavement programs for children.

Although experts say there's no such thing as a typical philanthropist, the 54-year-old Worthington mother fits the nation's fastest-growing profile: an active, passionate donor who wants to oversee her benevolence now, not stipulate it in a will.

"Donor-directed is what people want," said Douglas F. Kridler, president of the Columbus Foundation. "People aren't giving to us. They're giving through us."



Ann DiMarco is among the new wave of philanthropists who are turning to foundations to help them manage their giving. DiMarco and her husband gave \$25,000 to benefit Hospice for Children at Ohio Health.



A remembrance tree that DiMarco helped children create at Kobacker House reflects her devotion to the bereavement program.

They're also doing it in staggering amounts. While organizations such as the United Way of Central Ohio struggle with flat-lining donations, the foundation took in \$107 million in new gifts for 2006 and grew by a record 58 percent over the previous year.

It also awarded \$72.4 million in philanthropic grants to the community, the most in one year.

The foundation has assets of about \$975 million, and Kridler thinks it could hit the \$1 billion mark soon.

The 2007 general-fund revenue projection for the entire city of Columbus is \$608 million.

"We're the ninth-largest community foundation in the U.S. even though we're the 15th-largest metro area," Kridler said of the 63-year-old organization. "And for the most part, it's first-generation wealth. These are self-made people. You don't have to be a Rockefeller to engage with the Columbus Foundation."

Heavy-hitters and millionaires, of course, abound. But foundation officials say the average gift in 2006 was \$25,339 -- about the size of the new DiMarco fund to benefit Hospice for Children at Ohio Health. The couple and their three grown children also give to various causes through a family fund they established at the foundation in 2005.

DiMarco said that neither she nor her husband, Tom, grew up with money. After they moved to Columbus from Philadelphia in 1993, his position with a health-care services company turned out to be more lucrative than they imagined, she said.

"Coming from a middle-class background and growing into wealth, sometimes I do feel a little out of place," Mrs. DiMarco said, laughing. "I was a dietitian."

The wealth that has fueled an explosion in philanthropy nationwide "is modest as well as magnificent," said Jeff Martin, a spokesman for the Council on Foundations in Washington, D.C. "Across the country, you can start a donor-advised fund for as little as \$2,500."

The tech boom spurred much of the interest in giving, as did publicity about the largess of mega-philanthropists Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, Martin said.

In 1995, there were 25,600 foundations in the United States. By 2000, the number had more than doubled, to 56,600.

"The trend is going to continue," he said. "The intergenerational transfer of wealth in this country is estimated to be about \$40 trillion by 2050."

The Columbus Foundation is creative, Martin said. What it lacks in old-money benefactors it makes up for in savvy.

When Kridler came to the Foundation five years ago, for example, he changed the name of the organization's most important department: Advancement became Donor Services.

"I argued that the arrow was going the wrong way," he said. "We want people to think of their donation as a charitable checking account."

For the DiMarcos, the difference isn't just semantics. They rely on the foundation for advice and to scrupulously carry out their wishes about how their money is managed and spent.

Over the past five years, donor-advised funds have more than doubled at the Columbus Foundation. Last year, they accounted for 45 percent of all gifts, officials said. In addition to Mrs. DiMarco's devotion to Hospice for Children, they support such causes as tsunami orphans in Sri Lanka and scholarships for needy students from Pickaway County.

And 67 percent of gifts came from people who, like Mrs. DiMarco, are very much alive.

"There's this idea that you should leave it for your children," she said. "And we will leave them something. But my husband and I are so awed and grateful that we've come to this position, we want to do things now."

The DiMarco siblings understand, she said. If all goes as planned, they'll do the same.

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Ann DiMARCO

Columbus Foundation donor

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