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Nurturing grassroots giving

Local foundation launches student generosity initiative

by *JENNIFER TUOHY*

It's summer 2014; you are a first-time visitor to the Wood River Valley and have injured your leg on an overly enthusiastic Bald Mountain bike ride. You're sitting in a hospital room in St. Luke's waiting for the diagnosis. You notice an iPad on the table in your room. You pick it up and are greeted by a video of Blaine County students sharing with you the things that comfort them when they are sick or hurt—they've sent you a virtual get-well card.



A few days later, as part of your physical therapy, you decide to take a gentle stroll around the Silver Creek Preserve. You stumble across a new wetland boardwalk trail just north of the Kilpatrick Pond. The boardwalk and the signs, you are informed by a Nature Conservancy volunteer, were all built and designed by the students of Blaine County.

"Wow," you think to yourself. "The students of this valley are incredibly generous with their time. This seems like a really special community."

If the Wood River Foundation has anything to do with it, these two projects, and many more, will come to fruition through the power of the youth of this community.

"The foundation believes that the fabric of generosity—and by that we mean time, talent, treasure and voice—is what makes a great community," said Wood River Foundation board President Morley Golden.

In order to continue to weave that fabric of generosity into this already incredibly generous community, Golden and his foundation have come up with a truly unique program that they have called WOW Students.

The program is intended to educate the youth of Blaine County about the importance of generosity, not just of the wallet but of the heart. It aims to provide them with the knowledge and skills to put this education to use throughout their lifetime.

The basic premise is that each of Blaine County's 4,000 K-12 students will receive \$25 to donate to a

Hank Moss, a 7-year-old Hemingway Elementary student, was one of 26 students interviewed about the meaning of generosity last month as part of the WOW Students initiative. The questions ranged from what they felt the meaning of generosity was, to how it has impacted them, to what they have done that was generous, to what would the community look like if there was more generosity. The interviews will be published on www.WOW-Students.org.

Courtesy photo

local nonprofit of their choice.

"That is the overall objective," said Golden, a 24-year resident of the valley. "However, it was clear we couldn't just give everyone a \$25 gift certificate—it would probably end up in a snow bank somewhere!"

So the foundation approached the five school bodies in the area: the Blaine County School District, Mountain School, Sage School, Pioneer Montessori and Community School, and partnered with them to roll the program out on the classroom level.

Beginning next month, Blaine County teachers will be able to choose a nonprofit "project" for their class to donate their money and, in many cases, time throughout the school year.

Participating nonprofits have posted the details of specific projects they are looking for help with (such as St. Luke's Wood River Foundation's patient and guest iPads initiative and The Nature Conservancy's Kilpatrick pond wetlands restoration project). Many of the nonprofits have inserted student-specific portions into their existing projects, and some have developed entirely new projects just for WOW Students.

"The idea is the teachers can weave the project into their teaching, engaging the students in selecting the project they will all donate their \$25 to," Golden said. "Sixty percent of the projects have a community service element baked-in, to engage the kids over the school year. Hopefully, at the conclusion of the school year, the kids will understand that their generosity has an outcome, that they have moved the needle, helping them understand that they can make a difference."

Whitney Werth, who is managing the project's public relations, said it has "an amazing amount of support from the teachers."

"The project will teach what generosity is, how to give back to the community and the importance of giving," Werth said.

The idea for this imaginative initiative began with a throwaway comment in 2010. At one of the first Wood River Foundation board meetings, the five board members were bouncing around ideas of how to implement their goal to engage the grassroots of the community. One said, "Hey, let's just give every student \$25!"

"We all laughed," recalled Golden. "But that idea rolled forward over subsequent board meetings, and then last summer someone else said, 'Well, why not?'"

Statistics show that 3 percent of any community provides about 70 percent of the philanthropy. The foundation wants this

project to engage some of the remaining 97 percent.

With the first year of funding in place, the WOW Students is now live. A wealth of information, including the different projects available and details about the program's investors and plans for going forward, is available at www.WOW-students.org. The long-term plan is to continue the project every

year, with the ultimate goal of raising an additional fund that will be available to seed-fund any new projects that the students come up with.

"We are anticipating that the students will come up with ideas of things to do in this community that are being overlooked," Golden said. "And we want to have a fund that if a group of students came up and said, 'We think there ought to be an X,' then we can take that idea and marry it with a nonprofit and the seed funding.

"To me that's the ultimate high in this. When the students start realizing that they're empowered and that their ideas mean something, and that we can give them enough energy to go out and see it get done."

WOW Students' nonprofit partners

Community Library, Company of Fools, Environmental Resource Center, The Hunger Coalition, Hailey Ice, Hospice, Swift Sure Ranch, Ketchum-Sun Valley Historical Society, Sawtooth Botanical Garden,

St. Luke's Wood River Foundation, Sun Valley Adaptive Sports, Sun Valley Center for the Arts, Sun Valley Ski Education Foundation, Sun Valley Summer Symphony, Blaine County Recreation District, Wild Gift,

Wood River YMCA, Wood River Land Trust, The Advocates, Animal Shelter of the Wood River Valley, Women's Charitable Foundation, Lee Pesky Learning Center, The Nature Conservancy, Flourish Foundation, Idaho's Bounty & Wood River Ski Club.

To learn more about the individual projects on offer by each nonprofit, visit www.WOW-students.org.

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