

the Dream Makers

by Joyce Romine



The original five alumnae who crafted the framework for the new women's giving circle at Fontbonne: (left to right) Nina Bryans, Kate Gunn, Carol Spehr (seated), DeDe Caspari, and Karen Castellano.

We've all heard about groups of employees who pooled their money to buy lottery tickets, then hit the jackpot and split the winnings.

In that same spirit, a group of women are merging their assets — and collective passion — for an endeavor that's making a very personal impact at Fontbonne University and around the world.

The Fontbonne Community Connection (FCC) is a new women's giving circle that funds projects proposed by Fontbonne staff, faculty, students or student organizations.

"We're a group of like-minded women who want to make a difference and have a voice," says Carol Spehr '63, the FCC chair. "It's about women connecting with women — this is the magic."

GETTING OFF THE GROUND

In the summer of 2007, Marilyn Sheperd, vice president, and Kay Barnes, now assistant vice president, both of the institutional advancement department, planted a seed for the giving circle concept. By November, five Fontbonne alumnae, including Spehr, Nina Bryans '57, DeDe Caspari '66, Karen Castellano '98, and Kathleen Gunn '65 began crafting the group's framework and recruiting members. Now at 60 members, the group is well on the way toward reaching its goal of 100 members by June.

Spehr says membership continues to grow — despite the economy — and that not all are Fontbonne alumnae. "It's the power of women who believe in higher education making a connection," she says. "And friends are telling friends. Women tell me they've been looking for something like this for a long time. They want to be part of it to make a difference in the world. And that passion is contagious."

(continued on reverse)

Fontbonne appears to be at the forefront of a movement nationally. According to authors Lisa Witter and Lisa Chen, who co-wrote the book, “The She Spot,” women want to feel part of a movement, to be connected to something larger than themselves. The authors say it’s less important for women to be the biggest donor in the room and more important to feel they are contributing side-by-side with others, accumulating power by numbers.

“By pooling our funds, our individual gifts take on the impact of a much larger gift,” Caspari says. “It feels great to have a positive effect on so many. Plus, we have the fun of getting to know each other.”

A COLLECTIVE DIFFERENCE

Each FCC member commits to a \$1,000 annual gift that is deposited in a restricted fund. Members meet to discuss how grant applications relate to Fontbonne’s mission and then vote on how funds will be distributed among the proposals received.

“I love the fact that we each have an equal voice in where the money goes,” Castellano says. “I have learned a great deal about what the university departments are doing now and what they aspire to do.”

The FCC’s first call for proposals resulted in 15 submissions. The group voted to distribute \$34,000 in grants to nine different projects. Accountability is key, so grant recipients are encouraged to share results from their project one year later at an FCC meeting.

“The grant proposals are a list of goals, dreams and ideas that are a priority but are beyond the scope of the current budget,” Spehr says. “And the FCC is about fulfilling dreams that support the Fontbonne mission.”

Some founding members say this new organization has drawn them closer to their alma mater. “I have

always treasured my Fontbonne degree,” Gunn says. “Now I feel an even deeper sense of pride about my education and a satisfaction in knowing that my FCC gift is enabling our faculty and students to reach higher and broader in their educational dreams.”

Bryans agrees. “I feel as women we have a certain obligation and responsibility to give back to the institutions that shaped our character and provided the framework for our lives,” she says. “I feel a keen sense of connection to our faculty, students and our more recent alumni.”

One of the FCC grants is supporting the Fontbonne communications disorders and deaf education department’s effort to improve Costa Rica’s newborn hearing screening and early intervention in deaf education services. The \$3,500 grant will help establish a collaboration between Fontbonne and a professional group in Costa Rica to provide information, resources and materials that will improve services for newly identified infants and toddlers with hearing loss. Professionals from Costa Rica are also encouraged to apply to Fontbonne’s graduate program in early intervention in deaf education. One student is already in the program.

“When these graduates return to Costa Rica, they will be able to provide services for infants, toddlers and their families,” says Dr. Susan Lenihan, professor and director of Fontbonne’s deaf education program. “And our students who travel to Costa Rica also benefit from a service learning opportunity.”

The FCC is also funding a \$5,000 research fellowship for Fontbonne’s Center for Migration, Memory and Identity, an amalgamation of new programs, such as Jewish studies, and continuing programs, including the Bosnian Memory Project.

“The center will focus on programs and exhibits relating to issues and concerns of migrating cultures and people,” says Corinne Taff, assistant professor and acting chair of the interdisciplinary studies department. “Getting this project off the ground shows that the broader Fontbonne community understands the value of doing innovative interdisciplinary work.”

NO LIMITS

The FCC is open to all alumnae, as well as women faculty, staff or other friends of Fontbonne — regardless of where they live.

“Since so much is done online, I can be as actively involved as the members from St. Louis,” says Judy Benevento ’86, from Bettendorf, Iowa. “We post the grants and cast our ballots online. It’s a great way to communicate, and we are living our environmental values by being green.”

The group does not inundate members with meetings, but when they do convene, each person is given an opportunity to be heard. “The heartfelt sentiments expressed within our circle are amazing,” Spehr says. “When women unite for a common purpose, the possibilities are boundless. I think it is fair to say that we are loving it!”

For more information about the Fontbonne Community Connection, contact Wendi Valenti 314-889-4712 or wvalenti@fontbonne.edu.

You can also visit www.fontbonne.edu/fcc.