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FISA director leaves legacy of collaboration

Breaking down barriers

Wednesday, May 26, 2010

By Tina Calabro, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Pam Panchak/Post-Gazette

FISA Foundation retiring executive director Dee Delaney, left, with the new executive director, Kristy Trautmann.

To people in the local disability community, Dee Delaney is a household name.

When news came this spring of her intention to retire as executive director of FISA Foundation in August, one could almost hear a collective gasp. With 14 years at the helm of the small but influential foundation, Ms. Delaney has had a pronounced and lasting influence on quality of life in our region.

On behalf of FISA, Ms. Delaney has changed the local landscape not only by funding projects with far-reaching results, but by bringing people together to craft solutions to longstanding problems and by becoming personally involved in many of the projects the foundation funds.

She became the first executive director of FISA Foundation when it began in 1996 with proceeds from the sale of Harmarville Rehabilitation Center, a nonprofit, to HealthSouth, a for-profit organization.

The new foundation would continue the mission of the Federation of Independent School Alumnae, an organization that opened a convalescent home for women in 1911 and the Harmarville Rehabilitation Center in 1954. That mission was to improve the lives of women, girls and people with disabilities in Western Pennsylvania.

Ms. Delaney, who had been involved with Harmarville since 1980 -- starting as a volunteer and ending as development director of its foundation -- sought the job of leading FISA. "I realized the impact the foundation could have. FISA is not a large foundation, but it's a very focused foundation," she said.

Over the past 14 years, FISA's endowment has grown to more than \$38 million. Over \$17 million has been granted to 726 projects in 298 organizations.

A roll call of projects funded by FISA reflects progressive thinking about including of people with disabilities in all aspects of life, especially access to health care. Programs have become national models.

Women with disabilities, for example, often encounter barriers in typical healthcare settings. Standard exam tables and diagnostic equipment were designed for the able-bodied, and medical staff often struggle to accommodate individuals with special needs. FISA provided the seed money for the Center for Women with Disabilities at Magee-Womens Hospital of UPMC, one of the first such clinics in the nation. FISA is involved in the overall issue of improving access to healthcare for people with disabilities.

Likewise, people with disabilities have difficulty obtaining dental care. A FISA-funded project at Achieva is creating statewide, systemic solutions. FISA also provided support for the Center for Patients with Special Needs at Pitt's School of Dental Medicine.

FISA has also taken the lead on training arts and cultural venues how to make events more accessible and helping places of worship more welcoming.

"Dee is a national leader in the field. If there were more people like her, we wouldn't have the issues we have," said Kim Hutchinson, executive director of the Disability Funders Network, based in Virginia. Ms. Delaney has been a board officer for the group since 2004.

Nancy Murray, president of the ARC of Greater Pittsburgh, said the issues Ms. Delaney has helped solve are ones that people have been working on for years.

"People talk about strategies, but never move forward to solutions. Dee brings all the stakeholders together to get to the solutions," said Ms. Murray.

"I think Dee has greatly influenced the next generation of nonprofit and philanthropic leaders, leading by example on the value of true collaboration," said Susie Chase, a board member of FISA and former executive director of Working Order, a FISA grantee.

"With Dee, it is never about her own role, or FISA's role, it is always about unmet needs in the community and the work that needs to be done. That seems to bring out the best in every partner, and in everyone who has the privilege of working with her."

Ms. Chase added that advice and technical assistance Ms. Delaney provided to Working Order "were of equal or greater value to the organization than the grant funds."

"I still, after many years, never come away from a meeting with Dee that I haven't learned something, been inspired to work harder, and understood more clearly the value of someone else's ideas and efforts."

In her retirement, Ms. Delaney plans to "give back to the community in new ways," she said. A new frontier is helping young people with disabilities prepare for employment and leadership. "We have to keep the fire burning."

On May 19, FISA announced that Kristy Trautmann, who has served as the foundation's program director for six years, was promoted to executive director.

"We sought a person who would follow Ms. Delaney's visionary leadership and guide the foundation into the next decade," said Jane Burger, who chaired the search committee. "We know that we have found such a person in Kristy Trautmann. She understands the challenges facing the populations the foundation supports and has the trust of the board and the community."