

# West Marin's own community foundation

## THE FUND

BY ANN BOREN

*This is the first in a series of columns discussing the West Marin Fund, a community foundation formed in 2010 to address the significant and unmet needs of coastal Marin communities and the nonprofits that serve them. What follows is an overview of the foundation; subsequent columns will look more deeply at the projects that have sprung from a first round of grants administered last year.*

We have an angel in our community that you may not know about. It's the West Marin Fund, which was established in 2010 by a group of local residents to provide funding for the "essential but unseen services" provided by the many nonprofit organizations in West Marin. Because no local government exists in the 11 unincorporated villages of West Marin, many of the basic services that are funded elsewhere by local governments are provided here by the area's 60-plus nonprofits. They are, in effect, our support system—an almost invisible network of mostly small

and often underfunded organizations.

Coastal Marin is a place of great natural beauty that is cherished by all who live and visit here. But below this beauty lie other realities that are not as immediately visible, such as a lack of government services, a dearth of public transportation options and a median income level lower than the county average. In addition, there is a limited donor base available to support the nonprofit groups that provide services vital to our communities.

The West Marin Fund was created to address these issues. Its mission is to provide new funding and other assistance to existing nonprofits, expand charitable giving and volunteer activity from residents and visitors and to support innovative endeavors that benefit the community but are beyond the scope of existing nonprofits.

The first project the West Marin Fund undertook was to survey the needs of the area's nonprofits through personal interviews and a written questionnaire. Not surprisingly, many identified operating funds as their most important need, along with tech help, communications and board development.

In response, the fund began offering a series of free skill-building workshops, called ConFabs, to all local nonprofits to

increase their capacities and to provide a rare opportunity to swap stories, exchange best practices and socialize together. Four of these ConFabs have been held so far and topics covered have included the role of nonprofit boards; how and why to use Facebook; creating an iPhone video for your website; enhancing effectiveness with IT tools; and nonprofit law. Presenters have included nationally recognized nonprofit attorney Tom Silk, former Dance Palace Community Center executive director Carol Friedman and Marin Community Foundation's director of philanthropic planning, Brian van Weele.

"To a certain extent, we're reinventing the wheel in our individual organizations," said Ann Emanuels, the president of the Dance Palace Community and Cultural Center board, after attending the last ConFab. "It's a huge help from the West Marin Fund to bring us all together for these types of gatherings. It strengthens and energizes all of us."

A little over a year ago, the fund brought on its first executive director, Catherine Porter, who has extensive experience working with foundations both nationally and internationally, and is a fellow at Commonweal in Bolinas. Since then, the fund has opened an office on the top floor of the

Livery Building in Point Reyes Station and established a website ([westmarinfund.org](http://westmarinfund.org)) and a lively Facebook page.

It also has raised \$600,000, well on its way to raising the \$2 million it hopes to have by the end of 2014. This past year, the fund gave out 46 small grants in two rounds to nonprofits from Muir Beach to Tomales; the first round was for increasing nonprofits' fundraising capacity, and the second for engaging local youth in community service. Another round of grants is planned for the spring.

"Thanks to the West Marin Fund we were able inspire youth to take part in science and conservation, two fields where they can really make a huge difference in the world," said Dr. Chris Pincetich of Turtle Island Restoration Network.

West Marin has amazing beauty, a strong visitor economy and—less obviously—a good number of problems and unmet needs. By providing support to the people and nonprofits that address these needs, the West Marin Fund hopes to strengthen the fabric of our region as a whole. As 2013 ends, it asks all our residents, both full-time and part-time, to join them in giving generously to the local nonprofits we all rely on.

*Ann Boren, an Inverness resident, has served as a board and staff member in many local and national nonprofits.*