



Giving Through Youth

2015-2025



Summary

For the past decade, the Giving Through Youth program has been inspiring the next generation of community leaders in West Marin. Through a unique collaboration between West Marin Fund and local schools, elementary and middle school students step into the role of grantmakers—learning about local needs, researching nonprofits, and making thoughtful decisions about where to allocate real grant dollars.

What began in 2015 with just 16 students at two schools has grown into a vibrant program serving nearly 40 students across three schools each year, with hopes to welcome another school next year. Along the way, students have recommended over \$67,000 in 93 grants to 43 organizations that strengthen West Marin.

The heart of the program is simple yet profound: students see that giving back is not only possible, but powerful. They learn that funding decisions carry weight, that reaching agreements with their peers isn't always easy, and that every nonprofit, whether it serves animals, protects the environment, or feeds families, has a story worth hearing.

Teachers praise the program for sparking rich classroom discussions and motivating students to take the assignment seriously because their decisions make a real difference. Principals see a deep sense of pride and ownership in students who find their voices to influence others. And donors value the chance to plant seeds of generosity and civic responsibility that will grow for years to come.

From heartfelt presentations to lively debates, from researching community needs to shaking hands with nonprofit leaders at award ceremonies, Giving Through Youth gives young people the tools—and the confidence—to be changemakers.

As one student commented,

“It felt like I was being a helpful, and important part of the community”

2015-2025 at a Glance



305

Students Participated



3

with a 4th anticipated in 2026
Schools Involved



93

Grants Awarded



43

Organizations Supported



\$67,875

Total Funds Granted



\$74,240

from 11 donors
Donor Contributions

Purpose

The primary goal of the Giving Through Youth program is to increase students' knowledge of the nonprofit sector and philanthropy by engaging them in real-world decision-making about distributing grant dollars—helping to lay a foundation for future volunteerism and giving back to their communities.

Giving Through Youth is a collaboration between West Marin Fund and schools in West Marin, involving elementary and middle school students in philanthropy and community service. Supported by their teachers, the students explore community needs, conduct research on nonprofits, write detailed funding proposals, and decide how to allocate grant funds among selected nonprofits. This initiative not only enhances students' research, writing, and communication skills but also instills a sense of civic responsibility and the importance of supporting community services.



History & Growth

Giving Through Youth began in 2015 when Richard Kirschman and Doris Ober proposed an idea to motivate young people to become involved in giving. With the administrative support of the Giving Through Youth Steering Committee—comprising Harriet Kossman, Elaine Doss, and Michael Mery—the project commenced at Nicasio School and West Marin School, with \$2,000 allocated to each of the two classes.

Since then, the program has expanded to include 39 students across three schools by 2025, with Bolinas-Stinson School joining in 2016. Participation typically includes three to four classes, ranging from 3rd to 8th grade, from the same three schools. While some schools were unable to participate during the COVID-19 pandemic, all three are now back in the program. Classroom teachers have typically taken the lead in implementing the program, with growing participation from school principals, which is helping make the program an integral part of school activities. In 2024, teachers and principals from West Marin schools met to plan the 2025 Giving Through Youth program together, and Tomales Elementary School expressed interest in joining the program in 2026.

Program Implementation

Currently, the program begins each school cycle by confirming which classes from all schools will participate during the year, and the amount available for each classroom to spend. Teachers, school administrators, and West Marin Fund staff review goals, refresh materials, and discuss the timeline. Afterward, West Marin Fund confirms nonprofit interest in participating and their availability to engage with students. Updated binders are provided for teachers to reference alongside their curricula. Teacher-developed content is in preparation to support the onboarding of new schools and classrooms.

During winter and spring, students move through a series of steps. They begin by identifying community issues and researching local nonprofits, using a list provided by West Marin Fund, which includes conducting interviews with nonprofit leaders. Next, they write essays in support of the organizations they studied, present their findings to classmates, and collectively decide how to allocate the available funds. Each classroom brings its unique dynamic, shaped by grade level and class size, while adhering to the same overall structure.

Award Ceremonies

The program concludes with an end-of-year award ceremony at each school. Teachers plan and lead these celebrations, with support from West Marin Fund in preparing grant award checks and certificates, inviting donors, and arranging photographic coverage. School staff and students gather for the event, where nonprofit representatives receive their awards. Donors, along with West Marin Fund staff and board members, join the ceremonies to hear students present their findings, share what moved them about the nonprofits' work, and personally award grant checks to the organizations they selected.



West Marin School award ceremony, 2025.

Program Evaluations

Each year since its inception, teachers and students have filled in evaluation forms to provide valuable insights that have informed the development of the program. In 2025, evaluation was carried out online for the first time, enhancing participation and anonymity.

Student Feedback

In 2025;

76% of students reported having heard of philanthropy and nonprofits before participating in Giving Through Youth, but stated that the program deepened their understanding of real-world organizations and their impact in the community.

"I learned about the difference between government organizations like the fire department and nonprofits like the food bank."

"I learned a lot about my nonprofit organization along with my classmates."

82% of students enjoyed the program and expressed pride in helping others, with many saying the highlight was preparing their presentations.

"My favorite part was learning about the nonprofits and being able to donate to them."

"I recommend this project to students my age because you get to work for something that actually makes a difference"

Students also discovered that giving money is not always easy.

"Working as a group was hard. Everyone had a lot of opinions, and some were only thinking of their organization 'winning.'"

"It was hard to know where to donate the \$2,000 because there were so many helpful nonprofits."

Overall, students valued making a tangible difference.

"It's a good way of learning about nonprofits. It also feels good knowing you helped others."

"It's important for people my age to know about philanthropy and nonprofits and how they help their community."

Teacher Feedback

In the most recent evaluation, teachers praised the program for engaging students and encouraging meaningful conversations about community needs and services. All would participate again.

“Learning the difference between nonprofits and businesses led to excellent discussions about local services, job opportunities, and how to get involved in nonprofits. Having their decisions lead to real change in the community motivated students to work hard on their research. Presenting to the whole school encouraged cooperation, public speaking, and team decision-making.”

“It helped us work together in groups, and as a collaborative whole class.”

Principal Feedback

Principals reported receiving positive feedback from teachers, students, and families, and all indicated that they would support the program again.

“It’s a great opportunity for students to learn about their community and take ownership of making a difference. There is a sense of pride in the end for those involved.”



Molly Scannell and Richard Kirschman, Bolinas-Stinson School, 2018.
Photo by Jacob Leyva.

Recommendations for Improvement

Looking ahead, both teachers and principals suggested enhancements such as offering guidelines for award ceremonies, encouraging nonprofits to maintain accessible websites for student research, and providing varied implementation approaches in teacher materials, along with prompts for deeper discussion. They also recommended introducing students to the criteria foundations use in funding decisions to broaden their understanding of philanthropy and strengthen their decision-making skills.

Student Experience

To capture the experience of Giving Through Youth through the eyes of a participating student, West Marin Fund worked with videographer Tom McAfee in 2018. The resulting video, *[Giving Through Youth: Diego Chavarria](#)*, tells the story of Diego's selection of the Muir Beach Volunteer Fire Department and his visit with community philanthropist Suzanne Speh to meet the volunteers and learn about the service they provide to the community.



Diego Chavarria visiting the Muir Beach Fire Department

Grants Awarded

From 2015 to 2025, Giving Through Youth students recommended \$67,875 across 93 grants to 43 organizations serving West Marin. Annual class grant budgets ranged from \$2,000 to \$3,000, with individual awards ranging from \$200 to \$2,000. Currently, grant ranges go from \$400 to \$2,000 per organization.

Funding by Focus Area (2015–2025)

- Animals and Nature: \$21,395 (e.g., animal welfare, therapeutic riding programs, environmental stewardship)
- Arts and Culture: \$5,920 (e.g., local cultural programs, community centers)
- Community Health and Wellbeing: \$13,450 (e.g., health support, safety net services, senior services)
- Emergency and Safety Services: \$6,800 (e.g., volunteer fire departments, disaster preparedness)
- Housing: \$7,000 (e.g., community land trusts)
- Youth Services and Education: \$13,310 (e.g., preschool programs, other youth programs)

These grants not only provided meaningful resources for local nonprofits but also gave students first-hand experience in how targeted funding can address diverse community needs.

Organizations Receiving the Most Grants (2015–2025)

- Papermill Creek Children's Corner: 7 grants
- West Marin Community Services: 6 grants
- Bolinas Community Land Trust: 5 grants
- Halleck Creek Ranch: 5 grants
- Tomales Bay Watershed Council Foundation: 5 grants
- West Marin Senior Services: 5 grants

See [page 12](#) for full list of organizations that have received a Giving Through Youth award.

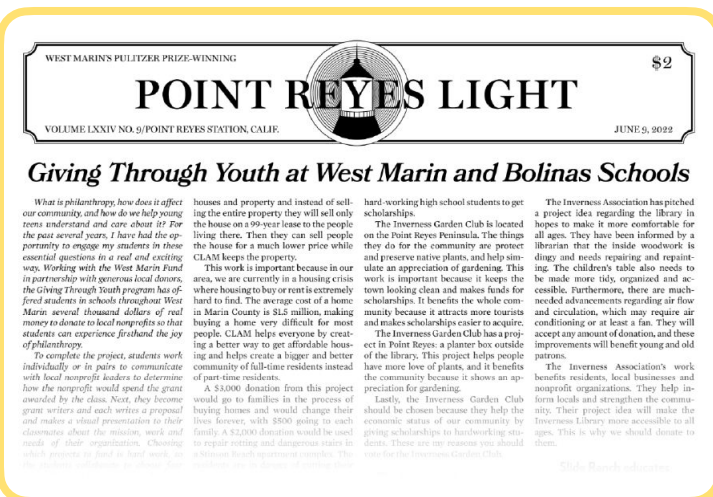
Media Coverage

The program was featured in the *Point Reyes Light* on June 9, 2022, in an article showcasing student essays and reflections from the Bolinas-Stinson and West Marin schools. The piece highlighted the depth of student research, the persuasive arguments they crafted in support of local nonprofits, and the thoughtfulness behind their grant allocation decisions.

Students described learning about the wide range of services nonprofits provide in West Marin, from environmental protection and animal care to food access and arts programs. Several wrote about the challenges of deciding between equally worthy causes, while others shared personal or family connections to the organizations they chose to support.

The article highlighted the program's impact in cultivating civic engagement among youths, demonstrating to students not only the value of giving but also the complexities and responsibilities that come with making funding decisions. Teachers quoted in the article praised the program for initiating meaningful conversations about community needs and inspiring students to see themselves as agents of change.

The full article can be found on [page 8 of the June 2022 edition](#).



Presentation of grant award to KWMR in Point Reyes Station, 2016.

Donor Support

The Giving Through Youth program was launched with a generous gift from its founders, Richard Kirschmann and Doris Ober. Today, funding for Giving Through Youth comes from a combination of West Marin Fund's general operating funds and generous contributions explicitly given to support the program. From 2015 to 2025, 11 donors contributed a total of \$74,240, reflecting a remarkable and sustained commitment from individuals in West Marin who deeply believe in the power of young people to shape their communities. Many of these donors have supported the program year after year, inspired by the way it cultivates civic responsibility, empathy, and leadership in local students. Their ongoing investment ensures that Giving Through Youth continues to thrive each year.

Looking Ahead

The Giving Through Youth program has proven to be a transformative experience—not only for the students who participate, but also for the nonprofits, schools, and community members who witness the impact of young people making meaningful contributions. Over the past decade, the program has shown that when students are trusted with real resources, they rise to the challenge with thoughtfulness, creativity, and compassion.

Looking ahead, West Marin Fund is committed to continuing the program across West Marin and, thanks to a planned bequest, plans to strengthen it by documenting teacher curricula and refining the approach so it can be shared with other schools in Marin and the Bay Area. With continued engagement by schools, students, educators, community members, and donors, Giving Through Youth offers the potential to inspire the next generation of civic leaders and changemakers.



Students at Nicasio school presenting their selected organization to the class, 2025. Photo by Ruth Lopez.

**For more information about Giving Through Youth
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Visit us online at westmarinfund.org

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Giving Through Youth Grant Recipients

2015-2025

- Audubon Canyon Ranch
- Bolinas Children's Center
- Bolinas Community Center
- Bolinas Community Land Trust
- Bolinas Stinson Summer Camp
- Coastal Health Alliance
- Commonweal
- Community Land Trust Association of West Marin
- Dance Palace Community Center
- DG Educational Services
- Dillon Beach Emergency Response Team
- EAH Housing
- Environmental Action Committee of West Marin
- Friends of Sam's House
- Gallery Route One
- Halleck Creek Ranch
- Institute for Bird Populations
- KWMR
- Marin Agricultural Land Trust (MALT)
- Muir Beach Volunteer Firemen's Association
- Nicasio Historical Society
- Nicasio School Foundation
- Nicasio Volunteer Fire Department
- Papermill Creek Children's Corner
- Planned Feralhood
- Point Blue Conservation Science
- PRNSA-Point Reyes National Seashore Association
- River Otter Ecology Project
- Saint Mary's Church
- San Geronimo Valley Community Center
- Shoreline Acres Preschool
- Slide Ranch
- Stinson Beach PreSchool
- Stinson Beach Volunteer Firefighters Association
- The Inverness Association and Foundation
- Tomales Bay Library Association
- Tomales Bay Watershed Council Foundation
- Tomales FFA
- Turtle Island Restoration Network
- Walker Creek Ranch
- West Marin Community Services
- West Marin Scholarship Program
- West Marin Senior Services