



A local house party, convened by the West Marin Fund, to talk about local concerns, local solutions. Photo courtesy of Catherine Porter

West Marin's own community foundation

by Ann Boren

There's an "angel" in our community that you may not know about.

The West Marin Fund, established in 2010 by a group of local residents, gives financial support to the "essential but unseen services" of many nonprofit organizations in West Marin. Because the eleven unincorporated villages of West Marin have no local government – and therefore no local government assistance – many basic services are instead provided by the area's more than 60 nonprofit groups. This almost invisible network of organizations is, in effect, our support system, though they are mostly small and often underfunded.

Coastal Marin is a very special place, full of great natural beauty and cherished by all who live and visit here. However, behind this beauty lie other realities that are not immediately visible. The lack of government services, a dearth of public transportation options, and a median income level lower than the county average all present challenges. In addition, there is a limited donor base available to support these nonprofit 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 alike, and to support innovative endeavors that benefit the community but which are beyond the scope of existing nonprofit groups.

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 of the nonprofits identified operating funds as their most pressing need, with tech help, communications and board development also mentioned by many groups.

In response, the Fund began offering a series of free skills-building workshops called "ConFabs" to all local nonprofits to increase their capacity and to provide a rare opportunity to swap stories, exchange best practices and socialize. Four ConFabs have been held so far, including on the role of nonprofit boards, how and why to use Facebook, creating iPhone videos for websites, enhancing effectiveness with IT tools, and nonprofit law. Presenters included nationally-recognized nonprofit attorney Tom Silk, former Dance Palace Executive Director Carol Friedmañ, and Marin Community Foundation Director of Philanthropic Planning Brian van Weele.

Among the attendees of a recent ConFab was Ann Emanuels, president of the Dance Palace board of directors.

"To a certain extent, we're reinventing the wheel in our individual organizations," Emanuels told the Fund. "It's a huge help from WMF to bring us all together for these types of gatherings. It strengthens and energizes all of us."

A little over a year ago, the West Marin Fund brought on its first Executive Director, Catherine Porter. A fellow at Commonwealth in Bolinas, she has extensive experience working with foundations, both nationally and internationally. Since then, the Fund has opened an office on the top

floor of the Livery Building in Point Reyes Station, established a website (westmarinfund.org) and maintains a lively Facebook page (facebook.com/WestMarinFund).

The Fund has raised \$600,000, and is 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 grant round was for increasing non-profits' fundraising capacity, and the second was for engaging local youth in community service. Another round of grants is planned for the spring of this year.

"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 Chris Pincetich of the Turtle Island Restoration Network, which received a grant.

A representative from Marin Organic likewise said that the grant it received from the Fund allowed local youth to contribute to their community, and to give back in a meaningful way.

Our coastal community has amazing natural 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 2014 begins, we ask all our residents—both full-time and part-time—to join them in giving generously to the local nonprofits we all rely on.