

Smith-Barbieri Progressive Fund: Focused on poverty, quality of life

Foundation provided grants to 36 organizations last year

LeAnn Bjerken

March 10th, 2016



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Don Barbieri and Sharon Smith started the Smith-Barbieri Progressive Fund in 1998 to support low-income housing projects. Since then, the couple has expanded the foundation's work to involve reducing poverty and addressing quality-of-life issues.

The Smith-Barbieri Progressive Fund last year made 54 grants totaling more than \$360,000 to 36 direct service providers in the Inland Northwest.

The charitable foundation's founders, Don Barbieri and Sharon Smith, say it's a drop in the bucket, however, compared with the funding needed to support Spokane-area organizations that share its mission goals of reducing poverty, expanding low-cost housing, and addressing other quality-of-life issues.

"We try to assess the impact as we go, and what we're learning is that there is still so much more to be done," says Smith.

Barbieri started the foundation in 1998, primarily as a way to support low-income housing projects.

“It began with the closure of the Park Tower high rise downtown,” says Barbieri. “I strongly felt it should remain affordable housing and explored the concept of buying and converting it.”

Barbieri and some partners bought the high rise and converted it into affordable housing. He then put some assets toward creating the foundation, which then bought out the other partners and created the initial fund.

In 2010, he and Smith, who are domestic partners, decided to expand the foundation, adding some of their own cash to grow the fund to \$2.6 million. As the foundation’s sole trustees, the couple personally donate to the foundation themselves to fund certain projects and cover all overhead costs. They employ no staff and draw no salaries.

Donations made by Smith and Barbieri are invested in environmental, social, and governance, or ESG, funds. The couple then uses income from those investments, along with donations received from others, to create grants. The fund made its first grants in 2011, starting with the initial fund of \$2.6 million and growing steadily each year, through a combination of the couple’s personal donations and asset sales. Its current assets now total almost \$7 million.

While Smith and Barbieri remain the largest donors, the foundation also receives donations from about 400 others, with contributions ranging from \$5 to thousands of dollars. Smith says 100 percent of all income from donations goes directly to a donor’s preferred cause or organization.

The foundation’s website lists about 50 organizations that have received grants from the fund, ranging from larger causes like Washington State University Health Sciences Spokane’s University-Community partnership to reduce health disparities, to smaller causes like the Women & Children’s Free Restaurant and Community Kitchen.

“We’ve actually found that many of the smaller causes end up having some of the biggest impacts in people’s lives,” says Smith.

She says most donors come to the foundation through simple word-of-mouth advertising, although the foundation’s email chain, website, and Facebook page also attract potential donors. Sometimes this results in donors choosing to donate directly to an organization or cause.

“I think it’s really great when we can raise awareness like that and get them to donate directly,” Smith says. Occasionally, the couple offers to match donations to a certain cause to help get the word out.

Barbieri says “Once you retire, you can either make more money or put the money you have already to work. You can’t take it with you when you pass on, so we decided, why not put it toward something good?”

Barbieri is a well-known figure in the Spokane community, having served as CEO and board chairman of Red Lion Hotels Corp. for an extended time. Barbieri worked for 34 years to build the hotel company as it transitioned its brand from Cavanaugh’s Hospitality Corp. , to WestCoast Hospitality Corp., and finally to Red Lion. He retired as CEO in 2003, staying on as chairman of the board until 2012.

“Having left that role as chairman, I felt free to be more of an advocate for certain causes without it inadvertently reflecting on the company,” says Barbieri.

He also has led several redevelopment and new development projects of properties along or near the Spokane River, including the historic Broadview Dairy, Red Lion Hotel at the Park, Red Lion River Inn, and the upscale Riverpoint and Upper Falls condominium developments, where he and Smith now live.

“It was shortly after we moved in that we really pursued the idea of expanding the foundation’s missions beyond just housing,” says Smith.

Having retired in 2003, and following Barbieri’s unsuccessful 2004 race as the democratic candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives, the two felt free to focus not just on affordable housing, but also the underlying causes of poverty.

Smith has 25 years of experience in national operations and marketing efforts for hotel brands.

She served as vice president of operations for the Hilton Hotels Corp. running operations and franchise services for the Red Lion brand, until 2001 when the Red Lion brand was sold to West Coast Hotels.

She met Barbieri when she accepted the position of executive vice president of operations for West Coast Hotels and moved to Spokane in 2002.

Barbieri says he and Smith have always shared an ability to foster communications and encourage groups to work together.

“We’re good at stitching together shared visions,” he says. “We felt we could use our leadership roles and experiences to positively challenge people in the community.”

Smith describes it a bit differently, saying, “We’re both big-picture thinkers, seeing the larger landscape. We ask ourselves, ‘Where is this money going to do the most good, and how can we get the absolute most out of it?’”

She says the foundation’s grant application process is purposely streamlined compared to those of many similar organizations.

“We try to give them as little paperwork as possible,” says Smith. “I’ve heard too many horror stories of organizations who take the time to fill out lots of paperwork, only to be rejected months later, with no explanation on which to build, improve and apply again.”

Smith says to apply for a grant, applicants must detail the nature of the project for which they are requesting funding, how the project or service fits with the foundation’s core missions, and how it benefits the community.

While the word progressive is part of the foundation’s name, Smith says applying organizations don’t need to be politically progressive.

“The fund is not actually political but our decision making is based on progressive values,” she says. “For us, that means working for a common good, favoring innovation, and supporting forward-thinking efforts that benefit all people.”

All of the foundation’s funding goes to nonprofit organizations, with the vast majority being traditional 501(c)3s. Organizations can be religiously affiliated, but the fund’s grants cannot be used for proselytizing.

“Ultimately, the goal is overall community wellness,” says Barbieri. “We have to be sharing resources to combat these issues and work together to see benefits.”

The couple says it has only ever rejected one application for having goals that didn’t align with the foundation’s mission. The only other reason they have rejected applicants is if they have already run out of funding for the year.

Smith says currently about 70 percent of the foundation’s grants benefit organizations that work toward reducing poverty, 20 percent go toward helping inform voters and create a more knowledgeable constituency, and the remaining 10 percent go toward affordable housing efforts.

“Affordable housing takes a bit longer and usually involves more people,” says Smith. “Some of the other projects are more everyday interactions and take less time to get rolling.”

As part of their efforts to foster a well-informed constituency, in 2014 the couple awarded The Spokane Alliance a multiyear \$60,000 civic leadership and social justice development grant. The Spokane Alliance is a nonprofit member organization devoted “to making Spokane a better place for all to live and thrive.” The grant’s funding helped to support the Spokane Alliance’s proposed quality jobs package, which included implementing a paid sick leave ordinance in Spokane. The Spokane City Council passed that ordinance at the end of the year.

The couple says they hope to continue to grow the foundation, using their connections to spotlight issues in the Inland Northwest. They say they look to distribute grants that provide proactive solutions, not just reactive ones, connecting people with help for their immediate needs but also providing resources and research for additional assistance.

“We’re always looking for new projects or services that are designed to grow programs, take things to the next level,” says Smith.

Barbieri has served as president of the Spokane Regional Convention and Visitors Bureau—now Visit Spokane—and the Spokane chapter of the Building Owners and Managers Association. He also served as a member of the Washington State Economic Development Board under three governors, as well as chairman of the state of Washington’s Quality of Life Task Force. He is also a past chairman of the Spokane Regional Chamber of Commerce—now Greater Spokane Incorporated—and chaired Sacred Heart Medical Center during what he describes as some of its strongest growth years, from 1988 to 1991.

He currently serves on the steering committee of the Healthy Washington Coalition and on WSU’s board of regents. He says the latter role is some of his most important work currently.

“The majority of new students coming in are either first generation or minority students, and it’s a struggle to make sure they have access to resources and an affordable education,” he says. “It’s probably one of the most challenging roles I’ve ever been in.”

For her part, Smith considers her work with the foundation to be her most important role now. She says the couple’s estate will go entirely to the foundation, so that their work will continue on, long after they’re gone.

“It’s some of the most inspiring work, with real benefits and impact to the world,” she says.



- **LeAnn Bjerken**

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Reporter LeAnn Bjerken is the most recent addition to the Journal's news team. A poet, cat lover and antique enthusiast, LeAnn is also an Eastern Washington University alum.

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