

From the June 3, 2006, issue of the Austin American-Statesman:

# The impact of Impact Austin

## Nonprofit pools individual donations to help other charities.

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Impact Austin started with a family crisis.

It was 2003 and Rebecca Powers' 49-year-old brother, Peter, was dying of cancer. But the Austin mother and former IBM saleswoman didn't just want to grieve his impending death. She wanted a way to honor him.



Thao Nguyen  
AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Rebecca Powers, right, started Impact Austin in 2003 to honor of her brother, who died of cancer. The group now has 324 members who raise \$1,000 each. Karen Frost, left, does pro bono work for the group.

Then she saw an article about an Ohio woman who had raised money for charity by simply asking her friends to give.

"It just pierced me," she said. "I knew this was what I needed to do."

Powers formed Impact Austin, a nonprofit that recruits women to pool their money and give large grants to local charities.

Since then, the women-only group has doled out a total of \$327,000 to three nonprofits. Next week, the women will award three more grants, \$108,000 each, bringing their three-year total to \$651,000.

In a city where multimillion dollar grants are not uncommon, Impact Austin is the welterweight of local giving. It doesn't give \$50 million gifts like Michael and Susan Dell or \$20 million like arts supporters Joe and Teresa Long.

But Impact Austin is changing the landscape of Austin philanthropy in a different way, said Barry Silverberg, executive director of the Center for Community-Based and Nonprofit Organizations. Its sizable donations propel programs that might not otherwise survive, he said. And its teamwork approach to giving has made philanthropists and volunteers out of women who never thought they could make a difference.

"I think they've really ignited the imagination of a lot of people," he said.

Powers' idea for Impact Austin was pretty simple.

She would ask 100 women to each give \$1,000 to Impact Austin by December 2003. Then the women would offer a single \$100,000 grant to a local nonprofit focused on culture, environment, education, health or family. The women would take applications from local nonprofits, hear pitches from several finalists and then vote to select the ultimate winner.

The idea caught on. By the end of 2003, 126 women had joined the effort.

Impact Austin wasn't the first project of its kind. In Boston, the Hestia Fund, which recruits women to pool \$5,000 donations, has been thriving since 2000. Informal "giving circles" are popping up all around the country as donors are attracted to the idea of amplifying their gifts through a collective effort, said Peter J. Frumkin, director of the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service at the University of Texas.

"It's people wanting to use philanthropy as a tool for building a network of like-minded, socially committed people and a way of committing to individual giving," he said. "One gift of \$1,000 has much less impact than a collective gift of \$100,000 or \$200,000."

That first year, 111 nonprofits applied for Austin Impact's \$126,000 grant.

That money went to LifeWorks, which helps homeless youths and troubled families, for the wages of teens who worked at the nonprofit's new Ben & Jerry's ice cream shop.

The money was a huge boost, said Susan McDowell, LifeWorks' executive director. But it wasn't the only benefit.

"It gave us 126 advocates supporting the LifeWorks mission and supporting the store," she said.

Family Eldercare, a finalist for that first year's grant, found its own supporters. After LifeWorks was awarded the money, several Impact Austin members were so touched by Family Eldercare's mission of helping senior citizens that they went out and raised \$35,000 for the nonprofit. Some women have continued to volunteer or donate to the charity, said Karen Langley, Family Eldercare's executive director.

"That's been really incredible," Langley said.

But it's not unexpected. After all, Powers said, that was the point of Impact Austin: to expose women to and get them involved with local charities.

Since its first year, Impact Austin has grown to 324 members. Next week, the women will award the \$108,000 grants to three of five finalists

The nonprofit now also has spin-off group: Girls Giving Grants. The group, comprised of the teenage daughters of several Impact Austin members, recently gave \$2,100 to the Austin Children's Shelter, which used that money to buy 42 \$50 gift certificates for their kids.

Yet despite the growth, Powers' original inspiration — her brother Peter — remains part of the effort. The group gives an annual award in his name to an outstanding member. It also officially gives away the money each year on June 12, Peter's birthday.

"He was the salt of the earth, and he would have given his last dime to anyone," Powers said. "I just want every date on every check to be his birthday."

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#### **2004 winner**

LifeWorks: \$126,000 to pay salary, training material and scholarships to 80 teens working at the nonprofit's Ben & Jerry's ice cream shop

#### **2005 winners**

- Communities in Schools: \$100,500 for the XY-Zone project, which teaches teens core values of respect and responsibility by efforts including community service projects and field trips

- Austin Travis County Mental Health Mental Retardation Center: \$100,500 for 1,000 voice mailboxes for clients through the 'Community Voice Mail' project

#### **2006 finalists**

Three \$108,000 grants to be

awarded:

- Zachary Scott Theatre Center: Grant would implement an apprentice program to mentor teens who are recent dropouts or are at risk of not finishing high school in all aspects of theater.

- Literacy Austin: grant would increase classroom capacity and implement additional remote service programs to support clients for their English as a Second Language (ESL) and Basic Literacy programs.

- Emancipet, Inc.: grant for the nonprofit, which works to prevent euthanasia and overpopulation of animals, would add an additional surgery suite and associated transport vans to their headquarter facility.

- Austin Young Men's Business League Sunshine Camps: grant would replace their existing arts and crafts building in Zilker Park and re-cover an existing sports court.

- UT School Of Nursing's Children's Wellness Center: grant would help young women in Del Valle pursue a health care career by funding a training, employment and mentoring program.

**Want to join?**

Impact Austin is enrolling members for its 2007 grant year. For more information, call 335-5540 or go to [www.impact-austin.org](http://www.impact-austin.org).