NEWS & NOTES

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The Gray Family Foundation seeks to fulfill John and Betty Gray’s faith in the human spirit. The Gray family acknowledges their responsibility to give back to the systems that nurture all of us: our culture, our natural environment and our communities.

Director's Notes

An elevated sense of happiness seems to have arrived with the budding flowers, the chirping finches, and the increase in daylight hours. I have been known to grumble in the depth of winter when I leave for work in the dark and come home in the dark, with the daytime hours filled with cold grey skies and drizzling mist. But this time of year, with flowers popping everywhere, bees humming with excitement and outdoor schools up and running, it’s difficult to be anything other than optimistic about life.

This year marks a transition and a turning point for the Gray Family Foundation. This will be the first full year as an independent foundation and the first time we have charted a course without the steady hand of John or Betty Gray guiding our decisions. The generations of Gray children and grandchildren as well as the OCF appointed board members that now provide direction to the Gray Family Foundation are more than up to the task, but we do miss the vision and wisdom John offered.

For us, this year will be about setting up the systems that will allow us to be as effective as we can be at delivering on the goals that John and his family set out before he died. John wanted kids to get outside because he saw that as a fundamental investment that would lead to greater civic engagement in adults. People protect what they know, they protect what they care about. If kids don’t get to understand the importance of publicly accessible beaches, if they don’t see the majesty of the Steens Mountains or the Rogue River Valley, if they don’t experience the vibrancy of a healthy stream or a marshy wetland, then it’s unlikely, when the time comes, that they will be willing to protect those resources at the ballot box, or in their city hall.

Besides the public benefit that comes from citizen engagement, getting kids outside just plain makes for a more engaging and higher quality educational environment. Learning about water quality by taking stream measurements is a lot more interesting, memorable and understandable than reading a textbook. And since you have to use math in order to make those stream measurements and
writing to describe the implications of those measurements, math, reading and writing suddenly look a lot more interesting too. It is an investment, and one that the Gray Family Foundation commits itself to making.

Much has been made of educational reform through standardized testing of students and teachers, but the types of things that show up on standardized tests are facts and figures that have a right and wrong answer. How do we test a student’s ability to make critical decisions where the answers are much less clear? How do we encourage them to want to learn, to be intellectually curious and engaged? How do we get them to be as excited about exploring a hilltop meadow with its myriad ecological systems as they are about exploring the next level of the latest computer game or the latest post on Facebook?

This is our task, to raise a generation that understands spatially, intellectually, and intuitively how they play a role moving our state forward. We need people who are invested in keeping Oregon bustling with spectacular beauty, inspiration, and natural capital. And to do that, we need to get kids outside today, playing, learning, and loving. This is our legacy. We look forward to joining you on this adventure.  --Eric

Notable News

Legislation requesting Statewide funding for Outdoor School
This year, the Gray Family Foundation partnered with Friends of Outdoor School, the No Oregon Child Left Inside initiative, and the Multnomah ESD to get legislation that would provide state funding for outdoor school. Jules Baily cosponsored a bill HB2516 that would allow funding of outdoor school through the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB). This bill has been referred on to the Ways and Means committee without recommendation where we hope our legislative partners will find some sources of money that can bring equity to outdoor school funding without tapping into OWEB’s restoration dollars. With your help, we will continue to work toward getting funding to support all kids in Oregon going to 5-nights of outdoor school by the time they finish 6th grade. To find out how you can help advocate for Outdoor School for Everyone, contact Kim Silva, E.D. of the Friends of Outdoor School.

Donate to Support Outdoor School
Do you love outdoor school? Would you like to see all kids in Oregon have access to outdoor school? Donate here and we will make sure your dollars get distributed to Outdoor School programs around the state.

Oregon Environmental Literacy Plan Moves Forward
The coalition of state agencies, organizations, and interested citizens who have been working for the past several years to implement the Oregon Environmental Literacy Plan are taking important steps in 2013 toward creating an enduring initiative that seeks to transform how environmental literacy is taught. This group is weaving a strong network of partners from around Oregon that together will chart the scope and sequence for curriculum and programming necessary for every Oregon child to become environmentally literate. In an age when kids can identify 20 times as many brand logos as they can identify flowers, when they readily spend 5 times as much time in front of screens
than outside in nature, when obesity and diabetes are skyrocketing while knowledge of natural systems is falling, we need to find ways to engage kids in understanding and exploring their world. You can get involved in the Oregon Environmental Literacy Plan and the movement to leave no Oregon child inside by contacting Traci Price.

Spring Cycle Update

On March 18th the Gray Family Foundation grants committee met in a sunlit conference room to review the 70 grant applications for our spring grant cycle with two areas under consideration:

1) Professional Development for teachers and volunteer mentors in the area of Environmental Literacy
2) Community Field Trips for 5th–8th grade to promote environmental literacy

Total requests exceeded $1 million. We budgeted $350K.

The grant committee is broken into three 4-person teams (members come from around the state), with each team reading 1/3 of the total grants. Many team members choose to read all 70 grants to form a cross sectional comparison. The teams use a loose ranking system to identify the project fit, the described impact, the budgets, and the community benefit. The teams discuss each project, its ranking, and a recommendation for funding. Then in the larger committee, once again, each project is discussed with team recommendations for ranking the proposals, as well as initial funding values proposed. Once all the grants are sorted into high, medium, and low rankings, dollar values are finalized, usually resulting in recommendations of about $500K. Then we pare back, reduce amounts and in this case made recommendations for $427K, exceeding our spending guidelines by $77,000 (the applications were that good!). In general, the foundation attempts to preserve its corpus but occasionally we will "over-invest" in order to further our mission. We recognize that there are many great projects and not enough funders to fulfill all the need!

The final recommendations go to the Gray Family Foundation board for approval. Grant letters went out at the beginning of April. You can view a list of our new grantees on our website.

Grant Process: The grants committee spends a great deal of time reading the grants with intentional attention paid to understanding regional differences and community impacts that a grant might make. We weigh socio-economic considerations, diversity, equity, quality, and sustainability factors as well as alignment with the Gray Family Foundation goals. It’s as much art as science, but over the past six years, the committee has grown to develop a clear methodology that works to elevate the best proposals.

We know that writing grants takes a significant amount of time. We also recognize that a grant from the Gray Family Foundation requires some extra work in the form of an evaluation matrix. We do not ask for this information lightly, we have been gathering your evaluation data for the past 6 years, compiling it, analyzing it, and putting it to use to make the case for broader statewide support of outdoor education.