

Food for thought

Local Dining for Women chapters eat in to help out others worldwide

BY MELENIE SOUCHERAY

The simple idea behind the nonprofit organization Dining for Women is this: Women who would normally dine out and socialize with friends, family and neighbors instead eat in, socialize and donate the unspent cash to help oppressed women and children around the world.

Mary Amdahl, a Macalester-Groveland resident and former elementary school teacher, learned about Dining for Women (DFW) while she was doing a stint with the Lutheran Volunteer Corps in Baltimore.

"It's a collective-giving organization that works for women and girls in developing countries," Amdahl said. "It promotes gender equity, education and reduces poverty."

Marghe Tabar of Highland Park said the women they help are quite often the financial supporters of their families. "You raise the level of the family and the women, then you raise the whole community,"

she said.

The South Carolina-based DFW organization was created in 2003 by Marsha Wallace. In those 15 years, it has raised more than \$1.5 million to help transform the lives of women and girls in developing countries.

"I think their focus will continue to be on small projects that can make a big difference," Amdahl said. "A lot of what they look for in projects is, 'How is this going to be monitored so we know how they use the money? Was it successful? And can it be replicated somewhere else?'"

Every month, members of the 800 DFW chapters across the U.S. meet to learn about a grassroots organization that has been awarded a DFW grant. Some of the programs supported in the last year include READ Global in Bhutan; Mali Health in Bamako, Mali; and the Women's Justice Initiative-Patzun in Chimaltenango, Guatemala. DFW has also established partnerships with UNICEF and the Peace Corps.

Last month, chapter members



Leaders of the Highland Park chapter of Dining for Women include, from left, Nancy Barber Walden, Mary Fleming, Deb Manderfeld and Marghe Tabar. PHOTOS BY BRAD STAUFFER

learned about African Women Rising (AWR) in the Acholi region of Northern Uganda. With the help of a DFW grant, AWR is teaching Northern Ugandan women and South Sudanese refugees how to sustainably grow food in small, home plots called permagardens. As a result, the African women are ensuring nutritional security for their families.

The national DFW organization maintains 12 regions across the United States. Minnesota is in the Heartland region along with seven other Midwest states.

St. Paul alone is home to two DFW chapters. Amdahl leads the Merriam Park chapter, which meets on the second Saturday of the month. The Highland Park chapter, which meets on the last Thursday of the month, is led by Tabar, Mary Fleming of Highland, and Deb Man-

derfeld and Nancy Barber Walden of Merriam Park.

Manderfeld recalled with a chuckle the evening in January 2012 when she saw a national news story about DFW, which then had about 30 chapters.

"I went online and signed up. I listed Mary (Fleming) as the co-leader without even asking," Manderfeld said. "I didn't have to. Mary and I have known each other for more than 35 years."

The pair tapped like-minded neighbors and friends—a group of a dozen or so every month, though they have many more on their roster—who usually get together in Fleming's home. Attendees bring dishes and beverages to share. They chat, eat, chat some more, then learn about the featured recipient of a DFW grant. A basket is set out for donations.

Amdahl returned to St. Paul from Baltimore in 2008. She became active in a variety of nonprofit initiatives in and near Bethlehem Lutheran Church in the Midway. The DFW seed that was planted years earlier started to grow with the Merriam Park chapter.

Although the chapter is not a formal Bethlehem Lutheran project, they meet at the church with the support of the pastor because it can

accommodate a large group.

"I started with people in this church," Amdahl said, "because they're my friends. They've brought their friends in. I think we have about 50 people who've come, but not that many regularly."

However, there is a hardcore group, Amdahl said. They are women who can always be counted on, even in the face of this spring's blizzard.

The DFW experience has affected the St. Paul women. "I'm a teacher," Amdahl said. "Teaching and learning are a big deal for me. Every month I learn something about an area of the world that I never knew about and an issue in that part of the world that women and girls have to deal with."

Barber Walden said she has become more conscious of "just the abundance of what we have. You turn the tap on the water; you wait for it to heat up. Then you see these women and their whole day is getting water and firewood, and they still have the time to raise orphans as well as their own children and still make a livelihood through the things we're sponsoring."

For more information on an established DFW chapter or to start a new group, visit diningforwomen.org.



Mary Amdahl fills her plate at a buffet of the Merriam Park chapter of Dining for Women at Bethlehem Lutheran Church. Behind her, from left, are Liz Drumm and Mary Weber (seated), and Phoebe Waugh and Cathy Lue (standing).

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