

Economy hampers Hawley Foundation's mission to serve children

Published: Sunday, July 25, 2010

By PATRICK H. DONGES, The Saratogian

SARATOGA SPRINGS — For some Spa City residents, the Hawley Foundation's name may mean nothing. But for thousands of local children who have been affected by the organization over the past 120 years, it has meant a place to stay, a hot meal, summers with friends and a chance for success.

For the first 76 years, the foundation had a physical footprint in the Saratoga Home for Children and then the Hawley Home for Children, which housed and provided for the well-being of orphans or children who didn't have caretakers. In the 1960s, the mission changed to one of giving, and today the foundation offers city youth renewable college scholarships, community organization grants and discretionary funds that can be awarded to pay for everything from a winter coat to medical treatment.

It also provides organization grants to a variety of groups that range in scope and size, including the Saratoga Economic Opportunity Council, The Prevention Council and The Salvation Army.

As the economy has suffered in recent years, however, fulfilling the mission has become more difficult. The foundation has already given out \$105,000 this year, said Deanne D. Palmer, president of the Hawley Foundation's board of managers.

"We've given out everything we have at this point," she said.

"A lot of us take for granted that we're going to have this stuff," she said of children who have received school supplies and Christmas gifts purchased with foundation funds. "The economy is affecting everybody, and probably these kids especially."

Physical legacy

In 1888, founding matron Augusta P. Wiggins began taking care of a few Saratoga Springs children who were orphaned or not cared for at what was eventually incorporated as the Saratoga Home for Children on Mitchell Street. Methodist minister Bostwick Hawley (1814-1910) was elected president of both the group's board of trustees and board of managers.

When the original site became overcrowded, Hawley lobbied his friends to help purchase a lot for the construction of a new home. The lot cost \$1,900 and initial construction was completed at a cost of \$16,000. The Hawley Home for Children opened Nov. 28, 1904, at 64-66 Ludlow St.

The mission of the home, as written by Hawley, was "to receive, to care for, and to educate indigent and orphan children." The home did exactly that, and took in both orphans and children whose parents could not care for them due to financial hardship.

In 1934, the building was expanded to provide room and board for 34 children from Saratoga and Warren counties.

In 1965, Saratoga County welfare officials stopped sending children to the home until a series of changes recommended by the State Department of Social Welfare was enacted. A lack of children to care for, the threat of bankruptcy and the growing intricacy of state laws and policies forced the home to close officially on Aug. 31, 1965, after 61 years of operation.

Today, the location is an apartment building, with three bedroom townhouses available for purchase for more than \$250,000.

Human legacy

If the physical legacy of Bostwick Hawley can be seen at the former Hawley Home, his human legacy is evident in those who have been helped and those who volunteer with the Hawley Foundation.

The organization was created in the wake of the home's closure with a \$500,000 endowment from wills and contributions. The foundation employs one part-time administrator, while its boards serve on a volunteer basis.

Pamela Polacsek is one of three members of the current board of managers who has followed a family tradition of volunteering with the foundation. Her father was a longtime member of the board of trustees.

"We're kind of like the second generation of families that are dedicated to the mission and purpose of the organization," she said of herself and board members Mary Clare Crandall and Bridget Kolakowski. Crandall's mother, Shelia O'Connell, is a former board member, and Kolakowski serves on the board with her mother-in-law, Lois Radke.

As chair of the Discretionary Funds Program, Polacsek oversees the yearly allocation of scholarships that allow children to attend summer camp at Camp Saradac and at Wilton's Gavin Park. This year, \$12,000 was provided to campers.

"Our ability to provide children with a safe, happy summer has been wonderful," she said.

Eleanor Mullaney, president of the board of directors, grew up watching the children who benefited from the organization. The backyard of her childhood house shared a corner with the Hawley Home.

"I was aware at a very early age of Hawley and its mission to serve and care for children," she said.

Mullaney has seen the foundation's finances suffer under the weight of the struggling economy. For the nonprofit foundation, a dip in the economy spells both a decrease in available funds and an increase in local need.

"Unfortunately, when it's not booming, our resources are more limited," she said. "There's always more to be done."

Mayoral legacy

The foundation may be viewed by some as one of the unintentionally best-kept secrets in Saratoga Springs, but residents are certainly familiar with one man who was aided by its work.

In 1973, now-Mayor Scott Johnson received a renewable \$500 scholarship, which he received throughout his undergraduate career.

"The Hawley Foundation assisted me in meeting my financial obligations," he said of the funds, which covered about a third of his tuition during his first two years at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He finished his studies at Syracuse University and graduated in 1977.

Johnson returned to volunteer for the foundation in the mid 1990s. He was president of the board of managers from 2005 up until last January.

“I never lose sight of those who assisted me in my time of need,” he said. “My work at the foundation and as president does open your eyes to the extent of the need in our community that isn’t always obvious.”

Johnson said his journey from foundation beneficiary to organizing benefactor has shaped his viewpoints on many issues.

“The tremendous impact of this foundation on the lives of these children is immeasurable,” he said.

Johnson agreed with current board members that the foundation has lost some ability over the past few years.

“Our ability to help those in the community is tied really to the function and output of the stock market. If the market is down, income is down as is the money available to distribute,” he said.

The foundation is currently undertaking a strategic review of its finances to determine what can be done in the future to protect the endowment and provide the highest levels of funding to the community. The board of managers currently has no maximum limit, and residents may apply to volunteer.