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GIVER: Marjorie Hays, a retired nurse and a founder of the Parke County foundation, in her yard in Rockville, Ind.

RICHARD MERTENS

In rural America, community philanthropy thrives

Enthusiasm for rural giving springs in part from concern for the future of small towns.

By Richard Mertens | Contributor to The Christian Science Monitor

ROCKVILLE, IND. - One woman left \$500,000 to keep graveyards tidy. Another left more than \$250,000 to send fourth-graders on field trips. Then there was Beatrice Collings, a widow with no children. When she died she left farmland worth \$1.5 million for college scholarships.

"[Beatrice] had always wanted a college education, but never had the opportunity to get one herself," says Bradley Bumgardner, executive director of the Parke County Community Foundation.

The beneficiaries of bequests from Ms. Collings and others are the people and institutions of Parke County in Indiana, a place where covered bridges probably outnumber traffic lights and where more than a quarter of children here in Rockville, the county seat, grow up below the poverty level.

Parke County may be rural and poor, but it is no laggard in charitable giving. Thanks to Collings and many other donors, the Parke County Community Foundation is able to spend more than \$500,000 a year on cemetery maintenance, scholarships for 100 students, field trips, and more: food pantry meals, handicapped entrances for churches, and this year, antique-looking streetlights along the main highway through Rockville.

Parke County is among a growing number of small towns and rural counties that are establishing foundations and asking local people to give to them.

"Community philanthropy is growing by leaps and bounds in rural areas," says Janet Topolsky, director of the Aspen Institute's Community Strategies Group, which promotes rural philanthropy in the United States and abroad. A 2004 survey found that rural foundations had more than doubled over the six previous years, she says. "A lot of it has come from the energy of local activists seeing other communities and saying, 'We can do it, too.' "

Enthusiasm for rural giving springs in part from concern for the future of places like Parke County. As manufacturers decamp and the number of farmers dwindles, many communities are searching for ways to survive and prosper. Persuading residents to give back to their communities, especially when they draw up their wills, is a leading strategy.

"We're in an era when federal and state money for rural development has really declined," says Don Macke, codirector of the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship in Lincoln, Neb. "That means if communities are going to develop, they need to find money locally."

Making the matter more urgent are "transfer of wealth" studies that show wealth in rural hometowns is slipping away. As the rural population gets older, elderly residents are increasingly transferring their assets to children who have moved to distant cities, experts say. Rural foundations hope to capture a small share of these transfers – estimated at \$50 million a year in many rural counties – for the benefit of local schools, community centers, day cares, and other civic organizations.

In some rural communities local philanthropy has deep roots. The Indianapolis-based Lilly Endowment launched an effort in 1990 to establish community foundations in each of Indiana's 92 counties. Many have flourished. But in other states, rural foundations are just starting. The Nebraska Community Foundation has spawned 100 community affiliates, most within the past five years. Dozens of small foundations have sprung up in Iowa after the state began sharing its casino earnings with counties that set up foundations and offering tax credits to residents who give to them.

Rural foundations are also meeting the needs of their community's population changes. In Indiana's Noble County, the local foundation is responding to an influx of Hispanic residents by sponsoring adult language classes, diversity education in schools, and an annual ethnic festival.

For many foundations, the most pressing need is to help make the community more attractive to young families. "How can we retain younger people and keep them from leaving Iowa?" says Ashley Canney, director of affiliates at the Greater Des Moines Community Foundation.

The challenge goes beyond providing jobs. Jeffrey Yost, president and CEO of the Nebraska Community Foundation, says much rural infrastructure – schools, libraries, swimming pools, community centers – dates from periods of greater government largess and is aging.

Foundations also face the difficulty of changing the patterns of charitable giving in rural America. Rural Nebraskans are "incredibly generous" but give mainly to churches, says Mr. Yost. "We're talking to people about keeping up this ethic of giving, but have you thought of these other things?"

But the greatest challenge may be to inspire hope for a brighter future. "The crisis is not a lack of capital," says Yost. "The crisis is a crisis of hope, of having a more optimistic outlook."

Advocates of rural philanthropy are counting on one advantage: the attachment of many longtime rural residents to their communities. They are thinking of people like Marjorie Hays, a widow and retired nurse who is a founder of and leading contributor to the Parke County foundation.

"When my late husband and I came here, we didn't have anything," she says. "We had three little kids. Both of us worked hard for what we had. Even though I wasn't born here, it was my home. It means a lot to me."

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