

Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation awards \$17.4M in grants

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(Photo: Max Ortiz / The Detroit News)

Mary Wilson (left), wife of Ralph C. Wilson, and Mary Owen, Ralph Wilson's niece, were on hand as The Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation announced grants to Southeastern Michigan Organizations on Wednesday November 18, 2015 at the Detroit Athletic Club.

The Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation awarded \$17.4 million in grants on Wednesday to 20 nonprofits and organizations across Metro Detroit, all part of the foundation's \$1.2 billion plan to fund initiatives close to its founder's heart.

Gifts range from \$25,000 to \$2 million to organizations that include Alzheimer's Association-Greater Detroit Chapter, Forgotten Harvest and the Grosse Pointe War Memorial.

Mary M. Wilson, wife of the late Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. said the legacy grant program is just the beginning of what she hopes will be a lasting, positive impact in his name on southeastern Michigan.

Wilson, a native Detroiter who was 95 when he died, founded the Buffalo Bills football team in 1959. His estate sold the franchise in 2014 for \$1.4 billion. He also was involved in manufacturing, mining, insurance and other businesses.

"Ralph loved our hometown of Detroit. He was incredibly passionate and devoted to doing everything he could leave a lasting impression on the people of southeast Michigan and ensure his legacy will be felt by those who needed it most," Mary Wilson said.

The funds will be used to support the foundation's 2015 transitional legacy grant program. Long-term grant cycles will begin in 2016.

With \$1.2 billion on hand, the foundation must spend all its money over the next 20 years and will focus on causes such as healthy lifestyles, early childhood and youth development, caregivers, community development and economic growth in Metro Detroit and western New York.

Mariam C. Noland, president of the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan which hosted the announcement at the Detroit Athletic Club, said Wilson leaves an incredible legacy.

"There are always choices about what to do with one's wealth," Noland said. "To choose to give away personal wealth to benefit the public is to be celebrated. Just think about the act of giving away more than \$1 billion dollars. It speaks to Ralph Wilson's values and commitment to humanity."

Mary Owen, the only paid employee of the foundation and Mary and Ralph's niece, said more announcements are expected on legacy grants in western New York later this year and in January.

Owen, a foundation trustee, is a former vice president for the Buffalo Bills organization and worked with Ralph in his private philanthropic giving. Taking on the post has been a rewarding challenge, she said.

"There is an awakening to understand there are a lot of issues to be solved here and in western New York," Owen, 37, said. "Some of those issues can seem daunting. We have to step back and ask how do we tackle those and how do we fit in."

The foundation is headquartered in Grosse Pointe Farms. Its first president David O. Egnor begins Jan. 1.

The Grosse Pointe Historical Society received a \$25,000 grant from the foundation. Its president Stuart Grigg said it came at the right time.

"It was the perfect fertilizer at the right time for us," Grigg said. "We went through a conservation assessment program last year on what we should do to be more