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A community revival story worth emulating

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Mount Sinai shows how older civic organizations can stay vital.



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Remember women's auxiliaries? Many of Minnesota's male-dominated organizations once had them, and benefited greatly from the fundraising and fun-raising capacity women brought to their combined missions. Many are gone today, made irrelevant or obsolete as women secured opportunities to participate fully in activities from which they had been previously excluded.

But some auxiliaries made it to the 21st century in modified form, often with new names, and are thriving. They can serve as models for adaptation and renewal of mature charitable and civic institutions of all kinds that seek to remain relevant in changing times.

The story of one of them is on display through Thursday at the Sabes Jewish Community Center in [St. Louis Park](#). A handsome exhibit, "Mount Sinai: Looking Back, Looking Forward," tells more than the 40-year history of Mount Sinai Hospital. It's also about a women's auxiliary that decided 23 years ago that its service to the community need not end as the hospital that had been its focus closed.

Mount Sinai was born in the years after World War II when [Minneapolis](#) was dotted by small hospitals with religious affiliations. Jewish physicians were excluded from many of them. A need for more hospitals combined with determination to overcome anti-Semitism to create a new hospital at 22nd Street and Chicago Avenue S. in 1951.

Almost from the start, the Mount Sinai Women's Auxiliary was at its service. At a time when women were denied many career opportunities, auxiliary members poured their considerable talent into services for patients and hospital personnel and fundraising for equipment and facilities. The group's annual book fair drew thousands of Twin Cities bibliophiles; its annual formal ball was among the area's leading social events; its gift shop, coffee shop and in-room TV leasing service raised substantial sums.

In its heyday, the auxiliary had more than 2,000 members, eventually including men as well as women. Its gifts to the hospital included \$750,000 to equip a cardiac-care unit.

Changing health care economics led to Mount Sinai's merger with Metropolitan Medical Center in 1987 and its closure four years later. The auxiliary could have folded, too. But with an endowment of \$350,000 and a still-relevant mission to improve Twin Cities health care, the auxiliary chose to continue as the Mount Sinai Community Foundation. Each year, a leadership panel made modest grants to deserving nonprofits. But the membership dwindled.

Fortunately, the former auxiliary's leaders were willing to change for the sake of appealing to a new generation. In 2012, the group embraced a new concept: a giving circle. It invites yearly memberships at a relatively affordable \$200 per year, half of which builds the foundation's endowment and half of which goes to "right now" gifts. Later, a teen membership was established at \$36 a year.

Each year, the members convene for formal presentations by selected applicants, then vote on how grants are allocated. To date, the foundation has given six grants per year of up to \$10,000 each to nonprofit groups whose health-related work could use a boost. Grants have gone to such diverse projects as dental equipment for a clinic serving low-income people, training for health professionals treating children traumatized by domestic violence and a prison-based training program for therapy dogs.

The giving circle concept has brought new life to the foundation. It's growing again, tapping a desire by younger donors to personally connect with the recipients of their charitable dollars and with their fellow givers. "Giving collaboratively and being able to see where your gifts are going, that really speaks to today's demographic," said Linda Stone, the foundation's chairwoman.

Stone said she's sometimes asked: "Why are you still around? The hospital closed more than 20 years ago."

Her answer ought to resonate with other older organizations seeking renewal. There's value, she said, in the auxiliary's legacy: "We learn a lot from the women who built this organization at a time when women had to tiptoe around the men. Some of them are still with us. Once you understand the spirit and drive of these women, you see why it's important to carry this forward." Auxiliary veterans, many of them now in their 80s, form an advisory panel for the foundation.

Striking a balance between honoring the past and adapting for the present and the future has been key to Mount Sinai Community Foundation's revival. It's a formula worth examining and emulating by other community organizations of long standing. At a time of year when charitable giving is on Minnesotans' minds, shoring up the vitality of charitable organizations themselves should be, too.

TO APPLY

The Mount Sinai Community Foundation is accepting applications until Jan. 7 for 2015 grants to nonprofit organizations seeking to "improve health, enhance well-being or otherwise advance medical care for Minnesota residents." Find more information at [jewishminneapolis.org](#).

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