YMCA, Red Cross among first to gain from miser's millions

By JONEL ALECCIA

New roofs for a YMCA summer camp, new cots for the Red Cross and new services to spay and neuter stray cats are among the first benefits of a $9 million legacy left by a Medford miser.

The Gordon Elwood Foundation has distributed $60,000 in initial grants provided by the estate of a self-taught television technician who lived frugally and died as one of Southern Oregon's wealthiest residents.

Seven regional organizations are among the first to receive funds left by a foundation formed by Gordon Elwood, who died in October 1999 at age 79, leaving $10 million behind.

Elwood, a self-described miser who rode a battered bicycle, collected bottles for deposit and drank day-old milk, mandated that his funds help organizations in four Oregon counties including the YMCA, the Salvation Army, the American Red Cross and nonprofit groups that benefit cats.

The gifts come as the local Leave a Legacy Foundation marks May as "national philanthropy month," hoping to encourage others to follow Gordon Elwood's example.

"It's an opportunity for you to leave your footprints on the future," said Katherine Thurber, chairwoman of the group holding a kick-off event at 11 a.m. today at the Hanley Farm in Medford. The Leave a Legacy Foundation is a branch of the National Council on Planned Giving.

The first Elwood Foundation grants include $17,000 for the Medford YMCA to install roofs on 12 cabins and build a kitchen at Apserkaha, a summer camp for kids.

"We are honored," said Karen Vezina, program manager for the YMCA. "We asked for $12,000 and we got more."

Other awards include $12,500 for the Medford Salvation Army to provide goods and services for preschool children; $10,500 for SNYP -- Spay and Neuter Your Pet -- to purchase surgical packs to sterilize feral cats and to provide partial assistance for surgeries for cats of low-income and elderly people; $7,500 to furnish a Grants Pass YMCA teen center; and $8,100 for summer camp scholarships at the Klamath County YMCA.

Local chapters of the American Red Cross also benefited. The Klamath Falls chapter received $1,500 for radio equipment, while the Medford group got $3,400 for cots, radio equipment and training materials for disaster assistance.

The Elwood funds are the first wave of awards that eventually could provide more than $400,000 annually to Southern Oregon social service groups.

They're also an example of extraordinary generosity that resides in unexpected places in Southern Oregon, Thurber said.

Many of the families that provide charitable funds in wills and trusts aren't conventionally wealthy, she said.

"We call them the millionaires next door," she said. "Every one of the major gifts to us in the last year was from someone living in a mobile home."

Most of those who've left substantial legacies are Depression-era people who, like Elwood, lived modestly.

"They saved their money and now they're sitting on a very large pool of assets," she said.

Thurber's group hopes to promote estate planning and charitable giving among local folks. Nationally, more than $10.4 trillion is expected to pass from one generation to the next in forthcoming decades.

"If you bring that down to the Southern Oregon level, that's millions and millions of dollars," Thurber said.

She encouraged people considering charitable giving to consult with financial planners for advice about distributing their assets.

For more information on charitable giving, call 732-6767 or visit the Web site http://www.leavealegacysooregon.org

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