

Mission to create an enduring funding resource for Island's charities

By Jessie Moniz

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Dr Myra Virgil is working on creating a community foundation to act as a central and enduring resource of funding for charities on the Island. ((Photo by Akil Simmons))

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Dr Myra Virgil is using lessons learned from a prestigious American grantmaking fellowship to create an organisation that will provide an enduring source of funds for local charities — many of whom are currently locked into a life or death struggle for survival due to the current economic climate.

The programme executive (Bermuda) at Atlantic Philanthropies Bermuda Limited recently completed her residency as a 2013 Senior International Fellow with the Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society at The Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY).

She was one of six people chosen from 95 applicants from around the world for the month-long programme. The fellows programme gave her the opportunity to explore community foundations around the world, with a particular eye to their roles and philosophical underpinnings.

Dr Virgil is now applying her new knowledge to a project she is working on with several key investors and community members, to create Bermuda's first community foundation to provide local charities with a constant source of funding. The group has been working on it for the last four years, and it will probably be launched by the end of the year as the Bermuda Community Foundation.



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"A community foundation is a hybrid, so to speak," she said. "It raises funds from a variety of sources, with the aim of building an endowment as a permanent philanthropic resource for Bermuda. It is designed to pool, steward and deploy donations from unrelated donors, dedicated primarily to the social improvement of a given place. Donors can decide where to direct their funds if they wish."

There is a board working hard on the development of the community foundation that includes Peter Durhager as Chair. Atlantic Philanthropies, and Renaissance Reinsurance are initial investors and Dr Virgil said others were coming on board.

"Community foundations are worldwide," Dr Virgil said. "They are a vehicle for community giving and give life to the theory of community philanthropy. With community philanthropy anyone from someone with a little bit of money to someone with a lot of money can be purposeful in their giving and ultimately become philanthropists also. It is important that people in the community from large to small have that feeling of being able to help."

She said initially funds from seed donors help to build it, but once built some assets are pooled and invested together although accounted for separately.

"It earns revenues from these investments and from fees for donor services," she said. "Grants are made from donor funds that they set up within the community foundation. The community foundation, which is an independent grant maker, disburses grants from its own endowed assets, comprised of funds donated to the foundation for granting as it sees fit."

She said the community needs the help of every member to become sustainable. In a world of dwindling availability of international funding sources, Dr Virgil's work is part of a growing trend towards recognising the potential of local resources and harnessing them for the betterment of community.

"No country can rely primarily on the donations of the wealthy," she said. "We all have to be involved. With some people it is time, with some people it is a little bit of money and with other people it is a lot of money, but we can channel that."

Taking part in the fellows programme was not without its sacrifices as it meant she had to be away from her husband and two daughters, aged 13 and 11, for several weeks.

"I was looking for something to augment my experiences having worked at the Atlantic Philanthropies which is a private foundation here, a grant making institution," she said. "Many people don't know this, but there is a theory around grant making and around community philanthropy. It is well studied and it is a big field."

Dr Virgil did not start out her career in grantmaking. Her father is Bermudian, but she grew up in Vancouver, Canada. She went to McGill University and first studied sociology. She went on to obtain three more degrees, a bachelor's in social work, a master's degree in social work and a doctoral degree in social science and organisational behaviour.

"I decided to come back to Bermuda with my husband and two kids when they were babies," she said. "We thought this was a great place to raise a family. In the meantime I worked for the Government of Quebec. Just before we left I was heading a team of ten social workers who were dealing with deep social and family issues that stemmed from poverty but also neglect and abuse."

In Bermuda, she worked for the Bermuda Government as director of Human Affairs, and then the Human Rights Commission and now works for The Atlantic Philanthropies.

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12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8

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