

Doubling down on charity



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A crowd gathers Feb. 19 at the start of a quarterly Power of Together 2 Southeastern Connecticut meeting at the Mystic YMCA. (Lee Howard/The Day)

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Mystic — Cindy Palmer was third up on this night at the Mystic YMCA, pitching the idea before about 75 people of supporting a small organization dedicated to helping women transition out of the York Correctional Institution in Niantic.

The organization, New Life Ministries, currently has two apartments in New London where women just released from prison can stay, Palmer said, and many of these former inmates have been separated from family and children for years. The apartments give women a place to live, and volunteers support them both emotionally and with rides to

work and appointments, she added.

Over 80 percent of the women supported by the program have been able to remain out of jail, she said, and the organization has stayed afloat mostly through grants and private funding to pay for rent.

"They are struggling, I will tell you that," Palmer said. "There is no paid staff. ... It's a grassroots organization."

On this night, Palmer's pitch was a winning one, which meant New Life Ministries, no longer associated with a religious organization, would be getting \$10,200 from **Power of Together 2 Southeastern Connecticut** (<https://www.facebook.com/The-Power-of-Together-Southeastern-Connecticut-1524041614507083/>). It's a 3-year-old organization that on the night of Feb. 19 surpassed the \$100,000 mark in its members' cash donations to worthy local causes.

Other Power of Together organizations in the region — one in Griswold, another in Niantic and a fourth just underway in Waterford — have offered another \$200,000 to charitable organizations in the region.

The Mystic-based Power of Together 2, meeting for the first time last month at the YMCA community room after three years at the Mystic Veterans of Foreign Wars post, started with four residents getting together: Barb Silver of Stonington, Gae Melford of Mystic, Karen Stone of Mystic and David Schulz of West Mystic. They are now up to 102 members who meet quarterly on the second Tuesday of the month, each pledging \$100 to the nonprofit that is chosen by secret ballot among the three causes for which pitches are made.



BUY PHOTO

Cindy Palmer makes the winning pitch for New Life Ministries Feb. 19 at the quarterly Power of Together 2 Southeastern Connecticut meeting at the Mystic YMCA. (Lee Howard/The Day)

"It's really pretty simple," said Schulz, who helped bring Power of Together to Mystic after being associated with the first local group in Niantic. "No budget, no board, no B.S."

Deb Fountain started the first Power of Together at Niantic Community Church in 2014, having heard about a similar organization in Michigan called 100+ Women Who Care.

"The idea was that people were too busy in their daily life to volunteer but wanted to make an impact," she said.

Deciding she couldn't find 100 women locally to get involved in the movement, Fountain came up with the name Power of Together and started asking men to be involved as well. The Niantic chapter already has raised more than \$190,000 for charities.

"One of our rules is that the money has to stay in southeastern Connecticut," she said.

But it can go to individuals as well as organizations, as occurred when former New London High School basketball star Doug Henton got help from the group to be able to attend Connecticut College. He later returned to teach high school English at his alma mater.



BUY PHOTO

Barbara Sahagan makes a pitch Feb. 19 at the quarterly Power of Together 2 Southeastern Connecticut meeting at the Mystic YMCA. (Lee Howard/The Day)

"We're looking for grassroots, heartwarming stories," Fountain said. "The people who speak from the heart and are not mechanical ... that's who wins."

Melford, the Mystic co-founder, said the beauty of the organization is its simplicity, and the fact that \$400 a year is well within most people's ability to give. Some couples and even children have shared memberships to reduce their individual commitments, added Fountain, but \$100 per pitch session is the pledge — whether members attend or not.

"It's a quick sell," Melford said. "It makes complete sense. How can we not do this?"

Most meetings last only about 45 minutes. Any nonprofit can pitch their need for money by putting a name in a hat, but only three pitches are pulled out every meeting. Some people have had to pitch ideas two or three times before winning funding, said organizers, with their importuning becoming more effective each time they try.

David Carruthers of Groton Long Point said he remembers winning more than \$4,000 for the former Mystic Area Shelter & Hospitality, now known as Always Home, a nonprofit that provides emergency housing for families.



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Mike Buscetto talks about the new Power of Together group forming in Waterford during the Feb. 19 quarterly meeting of Power of Together 2 Southeastern Connecticut meeting at the Mystic YMCA. (Lee Howard/The Day)

The winners, Carruthers said, tend to be "whoever gives the best talk; whoever has the most passion."

The idea behind Power of Together, said organizers, is that by pooling their donation dollars local residents can make a real difference for small or even larger nonprofits. The local groups have boards but no bylaws or treasurers; donors write checks directly to the charitable group that wins.

The idea is now spreading to Waterford, with the first meeting held Feb. 26 at Filomena's restaurant attracting about 80 members.

Mike Buscetto, owner of Filomena's and a board member of the nonprofit Cactus Jack Foundation, said at last month's meeting in Mystic that the Waterford-based organization has been very generous, giving thousands of dollars to organizations such as Safe Futures, Girls on the Run, Waterford Youth Services and Heavy Hitters, a boxing program for people with Parkinson's disease. He expects that Power of Together will mean even more funds for Waterford-area charities.

"If you know somebody is hurting ... we keep everything very confidential," Buscetto said. "A family needs it now — they can't wait till next month's board meeting."

The Mystic group, which includes members from all over the area, has given money to Groton Public Library, New England Science & Sailing and the Boys & Girls Club of Southeastern Connecticut, among other organizations. Groups dealing with immigration issues, blindness, domestic violence, the underprivileged and drug addiction also

have seen funding.

While Power of Together is primarily a charitable group, members say it's nice that these meetings also allow donors to get to know one another, creating a social network as well. In addition, the pitches by nonprofits put a face to local needs and allow donors a chance to ask questions they wouldn't get to pose if they were simply writing a check and sending it through the mail.

"We all thought it was a good idea," said Melford. "We all reached out to our friends."

"We got to 100 pretty quickly," added Schulz, one of the Mystic founders.

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