

## philanthropy is limitless

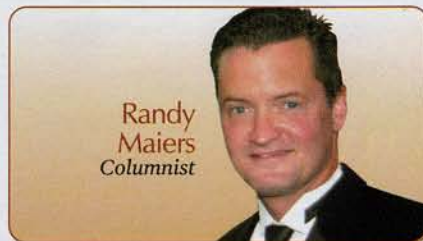
It's interesting how the field of philanthropy continues to open my eyes to the community and people around me.

Three years ago, I was amazed and saddened to learn that there were no long-term housing options for homeless teenagers in St. Clair County. The Harbor, our area's only home for teenagers, was only a short-term solution.

Then, through the generosity of the Youth Advisory Council, the Michigan State Housing Development Authority and our James C. Acheson Donor Advised Fund, we were able to open a beautiful home called Wings, which provides homeless youth with housing for up to 18 months.

Today, my attention is drawn to the challenges faced by people with varying degrees of physical abilities.

In the last year or so, the Community Foundation has worked with a number of other organizations, including the St. Clair County Parks and Recreation Commission, the Regional Educational Service Agency, the Blue Water Center for Independent Living, The Arc of St. Clair County and the Downriver Recreation Commission to develop a plan to address accessibility throughout the county.



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Our coalition was successful in receiving a \$314,000 challenge grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in Battle Creek through the Access to Recreation Program. It was that same foundation that awarded \$1,000,000 a little more than 10 years ago that led to the creation of our Youth Advisory Council.

Through this current grant, our coalition of organizations will be able to begin making improvements to our parks, rivers and natural resources to make them more accessible to people with all levels of abilities. We also will create the Community Foundation's first permanent endowment fund dedicated to accessibility issues. Appropriately named the Access to Recreation Fund, up to \$90,000 of the Kellogg grant will go into this fund, provided that we can raise at least \$90,000 locally. Over time, we hope more donors will make gifts into this new fund, helping it grow and giving us an ongoing source of funds to support programs

and projects that improve accessibility.

Now that we have officially begun the project, I am more cognizant of accessibility issues on a daily basis. I find myself paying more attention to sidewalks, curbs and even our own offices. But I have to acknowledge my ignorance and admit that in the past I had thought little, if any, about accessibility issues surrounding our parks, rivers and pools. Fortunately, that perspective is changing.

Beginning this fall, our coalition will begin making physical changes to some of the parks and natural resource areas in St. Clair County. We plan to begin with the public pool in Algonac, where an improved pool house and lift up to the pool deck and into the pool will greatly improve access on hot summer days.

Some time in spring, construction should begin on what may be the most exciting component of our project — Michigan's first public-accessible tree house, which will be built by St. Clair County Regional Education Service Agency at the Pine River Nature Center.

The tree house will be large enough to accommodate a small group of visitors simultaneously and will open up a whole new experience for visitors to the

nature center.

During the summer of 2008 we hope to complete the third and fourth components of our project, which will be new accessible kayak and canoe launches at the East China Public Park and the new Columbus County Park. Adding safe and accessible launch sites to our inland rivers will be a major accomplishment to help expand the enjoyment of our waterways.

Once these initial projects have been completed, a permanent advisory committee will chart a continuing plan of action. Using the available earnings from this new endowment fund, they will be able to expand our efforts and each year make additional improvements that lead us toward a more accessible county.

I may have said it before, but it's worth repeating: There is no limit to what philanthropy can accomplish with the right people and the right vision behind it.

Back in the mid-1990s we had no idea how proud we all would become of the accomplishments of our Youth Advisory Council.

Ten years from now, I am confident we will be just as proud of the accomplishments of our new Access to Recreation Fund.