

Mericka to head new program for foundation

BY MARY LOU CREAMER
VOICE REPORTER

GiGi Mericka has learned there are many things she can do to lead an active lifestyle, despite being in a wheelchair for the past two decades. She also has discovered many things she can't do - especially when it comes to recreation.

So, when the Community Foundation of St. Clair County recently came calling with an offer to head a new program, she saw it as a perfect chance to make things better, not only for herself and others with disabilities, but for all residents of St. Clair County.

Mericka, of Port Huron Township, is the program manger for the foundation's new Access to Recreation Initiative.

"Being disabled, I've seen these problems but I've never seen a remedy until now," she said.

Funding for the program is coming partially through the Kellogg Foundation in Battle Creek, which has awarded the Community Foundation a \$314,000 challenge grant to a coalition of organizations throughout St. Clair County.

The grant is through the Kellogg Foundation's Access to Recreation Initiative, a three-year, multi-mil-

lion dollar initiative with a goal of creating universal outdoor recreation for all people, of all abilities.

The application for the grant was a joint effort between the Foundation and St. Clair County Parks and Recreation.

"The Park Commission has always been pro-active on access issues with a planned goal of universal access for all," Mark Brochu, director of the county parks and recreation program, said. "If it makes it easier for people with disabilities, it makes it easier for everyone to use. People often don't think about that."

In addition to the Parks and Recreation Commission and the Community Foundation, the joint project also includes the Regional Educational Service Agency, Blue Water Center for Independent Living, Charter Township of East China, ARC of St. Clair County, Downriver Recreation Commission, City of Algonac, St. Clair DDA, Freedom Kayaks, and Port Huron Parks & Recreation.

The fiduciary responsibility for the grant is with the Community Foundation, which in the mid 1990s received a \$1 million grant from the Kellogg Foundation to create its Youth Advisory Council.

"We have a good track record with the YAC, so I think that Kellogg felt St. Clair County was a good investment for this money," Executive Director Randy Maiers said.

Since 2004, the Community Foundation, through collaborations such as this, has helped bring in more than \$1.2 million in grants to St. Clair County from other foundations and/or state agencies in Michigan.

Beginning this year, the coalition hopes to complete the following projects: the first handicap accessible public tree house in Michigan, to be built by RESA at the Pine River Nature Center; improvements to the Algonac public pool and implementation of new kayak and canoe safety programs with Freedom Kayaks; new canoe and kayak launch at East China Township and the new Columbus County parks; accessible boat docks in the rebuilt St. Clair Boat Harbor; new chairs for public beaches in Port Huron; and a new endowment to support future access-related projects.

First up are the new beach chairs in Port Huron and renovations to the Algonac Pool, which includes improvements like a lift to provide access in and out of the water.

The targeted projects must be completed by the end of March 2009 in order to meet the terms of the grant. In addition, the Community Foundation must create and administer a permanent endowment dedicated to improving access to recreation for people of all abilities.

As part of the grant program, the coalition partners will need to raise matching funds of \$260,000 to complete all of the planned projects. That amount includes the required \$90,000 toward the endowment fund match.

That's where Mericka comes in. As program manager, one of her main jobs is working with each

coalition member to raise the funds.

Mericka, whose family has a long history with the Community Foundation, isn't daunted one bit by the task.

"I'm excited about this," she said. "I've been raising money in this bad economy for other organizations, and this community is a real giving community, and I think that will be especially true when seeing what a worthy project this is."

"The beauty of the whole thing is that the endowment will help forever, providing funds to different organizations who are hoping to make things better for everyone."



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