

COMMENTARY

## Starting a new course



Post-Crescent photo by Kirk Wagner

**ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE NANI AGBELI** of Ghana shows third- and fourth-graders how to play African drums during a presentation at Richmond Elementary School in Appleton. The artist-in-residence program is funded by a grant from the Appleton Education Foundation.

### After 10 years, Appleton Education Foundation expands focus

Music teacher Patty Merrifield just received her first Appleton Education Foundation grant and it feels a lot like Christmas.

"I can't wait to get them," Merrifield

said of the order she placed with her \$1,500 gift to purchase African drums and other percussion instruments for pupils attending Badger and Columbus elementary schools. "The kids are excited about getting recorders. Wait until they see the drums."

Doling out grants to Appleton Area School District teachers with innovative ideas for enriching teaching and learning is what the foundation has been known for throughout the first decade of its existence.

**Kathy Walsh Nufer**  
Post-Crescent  
Staff Writer



And community generosity has made it grow substantially in donor backing, as well as its mission to support a broad range of education opportunities for local children.

"I can't compare ours to others but in 10 and half years, to grow from nothing to total net assets of \$2.5 million - that's pretty good," said Julie Krause, AEF's executive director, noting there are more than 7,000 education foundations nationwide including several in the Fox Valley.

"About \$2 million is endowed so it will support projects and programs for many years to come," Krause said.

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#### Appleton Education Foundation

**Formed:** Founded by community leaders and parents in 1997 to provide funding for innovative education not funded by the Appleton Area School District budget. Today, the AEF is a supporting organization of the Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region.

**First significant gift:** \$200,000 from Mary Beth Nienhaus, a retired Appleton teacher, to help finance the renovation of Goodland Field to Nienhaus Field.

**First named endowment fund:** Established in 1998 as a memorial in name of Betsy Melzer, a school district physical therapist.

**Total net assets today:** \$2.5 million.

**Granting:** More than \$1 million in grants returned to the Appleton Area School District since 1997, with \$197,000 in 2007 fiscal year alone.

**Growth signs:** By the end of 2007, the AEF managed 42 endowed and other charitable funds and more than 1,500 donors had contributed.

**To learn more or to donate:** Call 920-830-1290 or visit [www.appletoneducationfoundation.org](http://www.appletoneducationfoundation.org).

# NUFER: School foundation broadening its mission

From C-1

"One goal our founding board set was to establish a \$1 million endowment, so the early leaders can be proud of what has come of their effort."

Now the foundation, established on the belief that tax dollars alone can't assure children get a good education, is celebrating its 10th anniversary by branching out in a new direction.

Last week, it announced a major speaker series titled "Brain to Five," which will bring leading "brain investigators" to town from the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Waisman Center to talk to the public about their cutting edge research in early development.

The series opens Feb. 6 at Appleton North High School.

"Over the last year and a half, our board has been talking about, 'What does the foundation want to do when it grows up?'" Krause said.

"Do we only want to grant mini-grants, which have been wonderful, or do we want to do more?"

"The board decided to take on birth-to-five as an additional interest for funding and this is really the first time AEF is expanding its scope beyond classroom grants to something that has a communitywide impact."

For founding board member Dr. John Mielke, focusing on early learning is a natural next step for the AEF.

"We want to bring the best information from the best available experts we can find to our community," he said. "Getting a little glimpse of how researchers look at the brain elevates the importance of what we do every day, whether changing a diaper, cuddling or reading to a child. We're trying to get society to think a little differently and more positively about children."

When the AEF formed, founders made it a point to make sure it operates independently of Appleton's Board of Education and administration, and that has worked well, Krause said.

While two active school

board members serve on AEF's board, they cannot comprise a majority.

"As important as the independence we have is, it is also a very collaborative relationship so we are certain what AEF funds is in line with district goals," Krause said.

Certainly, there have been growing pains.

Early on, most grants AEF funded were through board members' gifts in order to get things up and running, Krause said.

"It wasn't until 1999 that the first grants were awarded from endowment earnings," she said.

Staff, district alumni, businesses, parents and grandparents have contributed since.

"Appleton has a strong history of giving to education," Krause said. "It has been neat to see the foundation grow

Several schools benefit from funds set up with the foundation.

Teachers have used AEF grants for everything from garbology studies of what students deposit in cafeteria trash to staff training in teaching reading and writing.

"There is a huge variety of requests," Krause said, and many are for enrichment activities that support teachers' efforts to teach things differently.

Last year, the AEF reviewed more than 80 requests. Most grants range from \$200 to \$1,500.

Recipients are grateful.

"We have been able to provide students and parents with learning experiences we wouldn't have been able to fund without AEF support," Richmond Elementary School principal Bobbie Schmidt said of the many grants her school has received.

"We have hosted family literacy events and math nights to provide parents with information for reinforcing learning at home. We have developed science, literacy and math book/activity bags that provide parents and children with materials and activities to create learning experiences at home."

Richmond also hosted

## 'Brain to Five' education series

Featuring four leading "brain investigators" from UW's Waisman Center in Madison speaking on early brain development and their groundbreaking studies on brain behavior:

**Feb. 6:** Richie Davidson on "Shaping Your Child's Brain"

**March 5:** Susan Ellis Weismer on "What Does that Gurgle Really Mean? Early Language and Your Toddler"

**April 2:** Jenny Saffran on "How Babies Learn"

**April 23:** Seth David Pollak on "Children's Emotions and the Developing Brain"

All presentations are free and will be in the Appleton North High School Auditorium. The Feb. 6 program is at 7:30 p.m. Times have not been announced for other speaking dates.

## Thomas G. Scullen Leadership Award

The Appleton Education Foundation will announce the winner of its first Thomas G. Scullen Leadership Award on Feb. 6 at the opening of its "Brain to Five" speaker series at North High School. The award was established in memory of the former Appleton Area School District superintendent and AEF founder, who died of cancer last spring.

artist-in-residence programs such as last week's visit from Nani Agbeli, an African drumming and dance artist. Other residencies featured bullying prevention, math and science experts.

All, said Schmidt, "provide learning experiences that make lasting impressions."

AEF also funded several Richmond staff development opportunities on such topics as kindergarten instruction.

Merrifield is convinced her newly ordered drums – something she could never squeeze out of her department budget – will make a big difference for her pupils, many of whose families may not be able to afford music lessons.

"I think this will be a powerful expressive outlet for them," she said.

She's sold on the AEF.

"I think they are a terrific resource."

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