

MAXIMUM IMPACT

written by **CHRISTINA NIFONG**

Since 2004, Roanoke Women's Foundation has granted more than \$6 million to area nonprofits.

On a crisp, fall Thursday, 170 women gathered in the event space at St. John's Episcopal Church in downtown Roanoke. There were smiles, hugs, and a general hum of old friends catching up.

But as important as their connection was, something bigger bound them this day. As they shared salad and focaccia, they also heard stories: of a church food pantry that served 16,000 people in 2025; of the desperate need for mental health counselors in the region; of an organization expanding its services to Roanoke's homeless.

Camp Easterseals Virginia camp director Amber Braley walked to the microphone and relayed a conversation she'd had with a wheelchair-bound camper. Braley told the audience she had asked what his favorite part of camp was, and he'd said, "How much I was out of my chair." At camp, there were staff and facilities to support his movement, his freedom.

The women in the room understood they had helped make that happen.

For 21 years, a growing group of women has come together to make an impact greater than they could make on their own. In 2025, Roanoke Women's Foundation awarded six nonprofits a total of \$432,000—funding that paid for staffing, updated infrastructure, and provided services. Over the decades, RWF has handed out a total of 108 grants to 79 local



organizations, worth more than \$6 million.

"For a lot of us who could not sit down and cut a check for \$30,000 or \$50,000 or \$100,000... this is a way that, by pooling the resources, you really can look at a gift that was given and go, 'I was a part of that,'" said Roanoke Women's Foundation co-founder Kandy Elliott.

In 2025, Roanoke Women's Foundation awarded six area nonprofits more than \$400,000. Grants are given to 501(c)(3) organizations that focus on art, culture, education, the environment, and health and human services.

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

In 2003, financial adviser and Roanoke philanthropist Ginny Jarrett attended a national conference where she learned of a new giving model that was gaining traction. The idea was simple: Women committed to donating a specified amount in a given year. The money was pooled. The women collectively decided where to spend the sum.

Jarrett returned home and called her long-time friend



WHAT IT MEANS TO THE COMMUNITY

Camp Easterseals Virginia opened in 1957 on 56 acres in Craig County. It is one of the few camps that offers overnight services for people ages 8-80 and all disabilities. It serves 550 people each year, providing outdoor experiences that may not be available in any other setting and offering hard-to-come-by respite to caregivers.

In 2017, Camp Easterseals Virginia built an all-abilities playground for campers with a \$100,000 grant from RWF. Organizations must wait five years before they can again apply for RWF funding. As soon as Camp Easterseals Virginia was eligible, in 2022, grant writer Valerie Coles applied. It took the organization three years to win a new grant. Each year, Coles filled out the initial application, advanced to the next round where a member of the grants committee visits, and participated in the grants fair. Each year, she received an email saying that Camp Easterseals Virginia had not advanced to the final round.

Then, in 2025, Camp Easterseals Virginia became one of 10 nonprofits listed on the ballot. Of those, six received funding. Camp Easterseals Virginia was awarded \$80,000 to air condition its recreation hall, replace a vehicle used by medical staff, and provide new mattresses for campers' bunks—big-ticket items the nonprofit would have a hard time affording any other way.

"I don't know of any other organization that gets anywhere close to that amount of funding," said Coles. "It

truly is transformational."

At a time when federal funding has been slashed and local governments struggle to meet growing needs, RWF leaders say their collective giving feels more vital than ever.

RWF president Dawn Erdman reflected on the awards given out in 2025. "It was almost heartbreaking to me," she said. "It's not the icing on the cake. It's the flour and the sugar and the dairy—the basics. I really had that feeling this year."

But, said past RWF president Betsy Whitney, working together with other women in the community is powerful. "Regardless of what divides you outside of that room, we all agree on the generosity and the connection. That's what I love about it."

Learn more about Roanoke Women's Foundation at roanokewomensfoundation.org. ☆

Left to Right: Camp Easterseals Virginia offers summer camp to people of all ages and disabilities in Craig County. In 2017, the nonprofit built an all-abilities playground for campers with a \$100,000 grant from RWF. In 2025, Camp Easterseals Virginia was awarded another grant for \$80,000.

Camp Easterseals Virginia camp director Amber Braley (left) and grants writer Valerie Coles (right) celebrate their Roanoke Women's Foundation grant with RWF member Stuart Trinkle last November.

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