

## IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

# The United Way has helped us: It's time to return the favor

Next Wednesday, January 16th, at 3pm in the Knox College Memorial Gymnasium, will be the annual meeting of United Way of Knox County. Usually a brief, perfunctory meeting held just before the annual dinner and awards ceremony, this year the meeting is raising community-wide interest and many people are expected to attend. Well, I should hope so. United Way is the core of fund-raising and support for 41 social service programs in the county, affecting 44,000 individuals in a county of 55,000. Unfortunately, the United Way is under attack.

A group of middle-aged men are stirring up the right wing contingent in our community, whose philosophy is freedom for all, except those who don't share their interpretation of the Bible. They are upset there is a clause in the local United Way by-laws that says all member agencies should be treated equally and should not discriminate against people they serve, and that includes discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Agencies requesting funds must go through a rigorous application process which, this year, included 44 United Way volunteers spending many hours visiting agencies, reviewing programs and goals and evaluating them before making recommendations to the board. All agency representatives are asked to sign an agreement with United Way which includes the United Way non-discrimination clause.

The recommendation for 2002 was that the Illowa Council of the Boy Scouts not receive funding because of their policy of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

The Boy Scouts of America has adopted a policy of discrimination against known homosexuals as members and leaders. Nationally, the American Boy Scouts has accepted United Way's position and efforts are being made in other communities to solve the problem. The United Way is not changing its position, but some Boy Scout groups are breaking away from the national organization, not just to get funding, but to take a moral stand on discrimination. Other local Boy Scout groups are signing the agency agreement anyway, agreeing not to discriminate on any basis.

This is the 40th year United Way has served the needs of nearly everyone in the county, in one way or another. Some of the 27 agencies providing the 41 programs funded for 2002 are the Mississippi Valley Girl Scouts, American Red Cross, Big brother/big sister mentoring program; Camp Kidz, for developmentally disabled youth; Carver Community Action Center; FISH, emergency food assistance; Head Start, Knox County Day Nursery, Lutheran Social Services, Carl Sandburg Literacy program, Knox County Teen Court and the YMCA.

In fact, United Way does support Boy Scout activities. An organization was formed in 2000 called Friends of Fellheimer, and United Way has allocated \$10,000 for direct scholarships for camp, uniforms and supplies. (Boy Scout uniforms now cost \$129.00) United Way has also set aside \$23,000 for the Illowa Council Boy Scouts for 2002, but they have not accepted it, probably because they will not sign the agency agreement.

The United Way board is a group of volunteers who are truly a crosssection of the community, including business owners, manufacturing officials, bank presidents, labor union officers, educators, employees, people from all walks of life. This is not a group of "bleeding heart liberals," a term



our coalition of religious right folks like to throw around. These are distinguished, hardworking, well-respected men and women of this county community. This is a combination of Republicans, Democrats and people who are cheerfully apolitical. (Personally, I'm a "bleeding heart liberal" and proud of it.)

This so called "Boy Scout coalition" is a dangerous group. With heavy religious undertones, they seek to take over the United Way Board and undermine the discrimination clause of United Way, and in the process, undermine the basic principles of an organization that has proudly served this county for 40 years. Although they deny it, if the coalition succeeds...

programs would no longer be supported. Does it surprise us that likely programs to be targeted help single parents and their children, victims of domestic violence, and teen-age girls? Of course not, because right-wingers traditionally haven't had much respect for the rights, independence, health and welfare of women.

Only 17 percent of funds contributed to Knox County United Way are used for administrative costs, in contrast to the national norm of 35 percent set by the Better Business Bureau for nonprofit organizations. Having served on a United Way Committee and been close enough to observe its workings, I am continuously impressed with its organization, administration and fairness of policy. Plans are thoroughly and thoughtfully made by many volunteers.

In contrast, the "coalition" members are clearly not familiar with United Way organization and programs and most have never contributed to them. In fact, many coalition members have no connection to the Boy Scouts.

United Way members (contributors, no matter how much) had better turn out in force for the annual meeting on January 16, 3pm, at the Knox College Memorial Gym, to uphold the Creed of United Way, which has stated since 1962, "We believe that the dignity and worth of every individual should be cherished, protected and preserved."

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