

Mission Moment: Freedom School Partners

By LuAnn Ritsema

Impact – it is in our name; it is at the heart of our philanthropic commitment to the community. Over the past 13 years, we've seen projects that we've funded take off and achieve tremendous results, in part because of the investment WIF has made through critical and strategic grant-making.

There's no telling what can happen when the right organization applies at the right time with the right project. In 2008, WIF awarded a \$98,000 education grant to Freedom School Partners to support a Freedom School camp. The plan was to learn from that project and scale the program and expand that opportunity to more children who could benefit from their six-week, literacy-rich summer camp.



Mary Nell McPherson with
WIF's Mary Gallivan

Recently, Mary Nell McPherson, executive director of Charlotte's Freedom School Partners, shared a "mission moment" reflection on the program. Initial expectations were easily surpassed with the first two years of the grant: the program more than doubled during that period and continued to expand. Today, Freedom School Partners serves more than three times the children it served when WIF made its grant in 2008.

"The funding from Women's Impact Fund allowed us to take risks we could not have attempted at that moment in the life of our organization,"

McPherson said. "It was critical in our ability to go into an underserved area; it provided support that allowed us to expand more quickly. There's also no

question that the investment and commitment of the Women's Impact Fund helped us to attract and secure funding from other foundations and corporations."

Mary Nell also shared stories of lives changed, of generations of students who were served by the program now returning to serve others. Here's one – once a student camper then a summer intern with the program:

"When I came into this summer with Freedom Schools, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life. I was dreading being home all summer while my friends were abroad, and I was generally feeling very beaten down. Like nothing mattered and I was just going through the motions.

"But [soon] I was inspired. I found myself caring deeply about the work I was going to start and I felt suddenly invigorated and excited by the possibilities my future had to offer.

"Then when school started I wasn't sure I could do it. The constant behavior issues really wore me down. I went home and cried and dreaded the next day for the first 2½ weeks. Then all of the sudden I realized I was waking up every day at 5:45 a.m. excited to see my kids, who made things so hard for me day in and day out. All of a sudden, the positives started to outweigh the negatives in my mind and I couldn't imagine life without seeing my scholars every day.

“Now it’s over I am so incredibly proud of them for everything they learned and how hard they worked. And I am so proud of myself for getting through the toughest -- and the most amazing -- two months of my life.

“The Freedom School message was important for the kids, sure. But honestly, it was the message that I needed to hear more than anything. This experience came at the perfect time in my life, and it made me realize that whatever I want to do with my life I can achieve it, and whatever I end up doing, I want it to make me feel like Freedom School has made me feel this summer.”