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# Couple Leaves Surprise \$100 Million Gift to Small Wisc. Community Foundation

By Maria Di Mento



COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF THE FOX VALLEY REGION

Media executive David Nelson and his wife, Rita, arranged before their deaths last year to leave the bulk of their estate to the Community Foundation of the Fox Valley Region. They had not previously given to the fund.

donation in the grant maker's 32-year history.

The foundation's assets stood at \$326 million before this latest infusion of cash, said Curt Detjen, the grant maker's president and chief executive. Detjen said the foundation has already received \$90 million of the Nelsons' bequest. Once the estate is settled and all of the money comes in, he says, the donor-advised fund will be able to award around \$4.5 million a year.

A Wisconsin media executive and his wife have left more than \$100 million to a local community foundation to which they had no previous connection — thanks to a suggestion from an adviser.

David and Rita Nelson were married for 73 years and died in 2017 within five months of each other. While most people in the De Pere, Wis., couple's orbit knew the Nelsons had money, they didn't live extravagantly. Their one luxury was a 41-foot custom-made yacht called "Davey's Locker," but the full extent of their wealth wasn't known until now.

The Nelsons' bequest, the bulk of their estate, launches a donor-advised fund at the Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region, foundation officials announced Tuesday. It is the largest

Money will go primarily to charities in the Fox Cities and Green Bay areas in the east central part of Wisconsin. David Nelson had a passion for lighthouses, according to his obituary in a local newspaper, and historic preservation will be among the causes the money supports, as well as parks, recreation and waterways, education, health care, human services, and community centers.

Eight grants totaling \$3.5 million were announced May 1, and additional grants will be given out annually starting in the summer of 2019. There will be no grant-application process. Instead, an advisory committee made up of people who knew the Nelsons will award grants from the fund.

### Establishing a Legacy

The Nelsons were not involved with the Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region during their lifetimes. Instead they learned about it through Derek McDermott, a lawyer who had served on the foundation's Board of Directors for three years. David Nelson didn't talk much about charity, Richard Nelson, one of the couple's sons, said in a news release, but he indicated later in life that he wanted to leave a large donation in his will.

McDermott explained to David Nelson how donor-advised funds worked and how the community foundation could help the couple establish a philanthropic legacy.

When Nelson signed the agreement with the foundation in 2016, Detjen says he knew the bequest would be substantial but didn't yet grasp the full magnitude of it.

"When I received a call from the estate that David had passed and that we would receive \$100 million, I couldn't really believe it," said Detjen. "It takes a while to absorb that kind of information."


### Small Towns, Big Gifts

After serving in World War II, David Nelson began a wide-ranging career in business that included serving as chief financial officer for two Wisconsin newspaper companies: the Post Corporation, which published the *Appleton Post-Crescent*, and the Green Bay Newspaper Company, publisher of the *Press-Gazette*. He later invested in television and radio stations and other businesses.



PHOTO BY CHRIS RAND

David Nelson was a lighthouse enthusiast, which could spell long-term support for the Grassy Island Range Lights in Green Bay Harbor and other historic landmarks in east-central Wisconsin.



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While it's unusual for a small-town community foundation to receive such a large gift, it is not unheard of. In 2012 the Elkhart Community Foundation, in Indiana, received a \$140 million bequest from Guy David Gundlach, a local man who had left town after high school and made a fortune in the insurance business and later dabbled as a Hollywood film producer. That gift changed how much the foundation was able to give away every year and transformed how it functioned.

As with the Gundlach bequest, the Nelson gift is important for the region and unusual since most people don't typically associate that level of wealth with Wisconsin, said Detjen.

"Most community foundations will never see a bequest like this," said Detjen. "It was stunning, and I'm still in disbelief that this has happened to us; it's exciting to think about what it will do for people here in the years to come."

Detjen said he hopes the attention the bequest receives will inspire other wealthy donors around the country to consider starting donor-advised funds at their local community foundations.

"It really is the best way to maximize their philanthropy in their community, especially for donors who care about the focus of continuing to honor their values and intentions," he said.