

Funding *for* Life

Private club employee scholarship programs are growing, and for great reason. At the end of the day, everyone benefits.

By Kim Fernandez, CAE



Shaughn Mitchell, senior assistant superintendent at The Country Club, Brookline, Mass., kicked off his private club career in landscaping while taking night courses at a local community college. Three years in, he's working at the club full-time and pursuing a degree in turf grass management at Pennsylvania State University. A scholarship he received through The Country Club's scholarship program, The Employee Education Fund, Inc., made that possible.

Mitchell hopes to become a golf course superintendent and says finding an education program specific to that goal was challenging—a general business or other degree wouldn't give him the specialized knowledge he's getting through Penn State's program. The scholarship he received as a club employee made Penn State's degree possible for him. "I am so grateful for the support that the Education Fund has provided me. Otherwise, I don't think I would have been on track to finish my degree, especially at a school as great as Penn State."

His story is inspiring and part of a growing trend; as higher education prices skyrocket, more private clubs are helping employees and their families fund degree and vocational programs through member- and community-provided funding. And while those programs are a lot of work for club volunteers and staff, with strict guidelines and required infrastructures, the difference they make is good for everyone.

Starting a Scholarship

In its second year of awards, the idea behind The Country Club's Employee Education Fund, Inc. was born when volunteer leaders learned a number of club employees were borrowing from their 401(k) accounts and other savings either to pay back student loans or to pay for college for themselves or their children and grandchildren.

"The amazing chair of our governance committee seized the opportunity and took the initiative," says club General Manager and Chief Operating Officer Kristen LaCount, CCM. "She really took it to heart" and started working on what was required to offer scholarships to alleviate some of the financial stress of higher education. It took about a year and a half for a group of trustees and attorneys to get the fund approved by the Internal Revenue Service. Today, the fund has its own board, stationery, fundraising committee and awards committee, and it's making a big difference to employees and their family members pursuing degrees.

"A handful of recurring, generous gifts helped to get the fund off the ground," says LaCount. "We exceeded \$3 million in funding in three years." The fund offered 14 scholarships in its first year and 23 in its second—nearly as many awards as applications. "We have about 150 year-round employees and both they and part-time staff can apply for scholarships," she says. "Some people change their minds or lack the necessary criteria. Our early estimations on where this might be in our highest years are around 30 applicants, and that's about the right number for where the fund is to sustain itself." Applicants fill out a standard form that asks about financial need and other awards they might receive, and submit that with their transcripts, letters of recommendation, resume, and an essay about why education is important and what the club means to them—that's a weighted part of the process and their connection to the club is a big piece of it.

"Our committee members don't always know everyone on the application list," LaCount explains. "Sometimes they're in back-of-house positions where they're not visible. Their essays allow our committee members to connect with them as individuals." Students who are awarded scholarships can reapply every year; about half of last year's recipients were repeat applicants. Award amounts, she

says, can be life-changing. "Most of them cover a lot of tuition," she says. "We work with the school to figure out what portion makes the most sense." Donations go straight to the fund, not the club, and the fund has an independent manager overseeing it.

LaCount is careful to point out that the need for a club scholarship comes from the high cost of education, not due to club salaries. "We started looking into 401(k) loans when they increased in frequency," she says. "We have a lot of first-generation employees from other countries and their children are the first to attend college. Many of these employees were not familiar with 529 savings plans when they came to Boston and settled here. The scholarship is huge for these families and in turn, they know they can turn to the club for the rest of their lives."

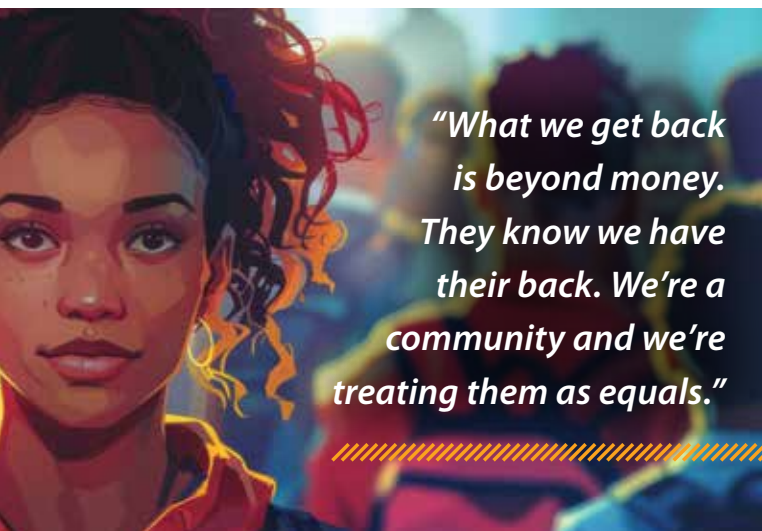
Something for Everyone

Woodland Golf Club, established in 1896, is a private golf club in Auburndale, Mass. Their club's members have supported the Frances Ouimet Scholarship Fund for many years. The Ouimet Fund is a scholarship program providing millions each year in need based scholarships to young men and women who perform more than two years of service in golf operations at courses in Massachusetts. Woodland Golf Club has a special connection to the Ouimet program because Francis Ouimet, a well-known two-time US Amateur Champion, had been a member of Woodland Golf Club. However, the Ouimet Fund is limited in its scope to only those involved in golf related operations, such as caddies, Golf Pro Shop staff, and course maintenance crews. As a result of these restrictions, not all employees of the club were qualified to apply. Those working in other departments, such as the dining room, kitchen, pool and club office were excluded from applying for Ouimet Fund Scholarships.

John O'Connell, a Woodland Golf Club member for over 30 years and a former club president, shares that because the club's other employees couldn't apply for a Ouimet Fund Scholarship, "We decided to develop our own scholarship program and expand access to all employees in all departments of the club."

"I've been on and off the board for 15 years," says O'Connell. "As I got higher up in the organization, I continued to be more exposed to managers of different departments, and we received feedback from employees who didn't qualify for golf-specific scholarships such as those offered through the Ouimet Fund. I always thought one of the largest assets of our club was our employees, and they drive our members' experience and happiness in so many ways. It was a good investment for our club to expand scholarship options by starting our own program."

O'Connell and Woodland Golf Club CFO Michael Platt made calls to other clubs around the country that offered various scholarship programs and learned many followed the same model of establishing a foundation which operated independently of the club. The club worked with an experienced non-profit legal firm, along with their outside CPA firm, for more than a year to get things set up correctly. The Woodland Golf Club Scholarship Foundation was launched in May 2018. Donations hit about \$50,000 by that August. The club currently collects about \$70,000 per year in member donations and distributes about \$80,000 in annual scholarships. "Our contributions are completely voluntary," Platt says. "Our board



decided to bill every member \$125 per year, but members can opt out should they choose. Many members and other organizations opt to provide additional financial support and we have many who generously provide thousands per year to the Foundation."

In addition to offering scholarships to employees, spouses and their children, Woodland's program also provides financial support to the local community through The Auburndale Cooperative Scholarship Foundation, a program run by The Village Bank, a local community bank. The bank program provides similar grants to Newton residents who live in Auburndale, where Woodland is located.

Woodland Golf Club scholarships are based on need, merit and promise, and can be used for college or vocational or technical school. "It's for any education beyond high school," Platt says. "And a portion of funding is dedicated to employees who are paying back student loans. We usually get 50 to 55 applications every year and we look to support as many applicants as possible each year."

Going Third Party

Belle Meade Country Club in Nashville, Tenn., launched its employee scholarship fund in 2013 through the Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee (CFMT). CFMT is a tax-exempt public charity serving the 40 counties in middle Tennessee and three counties in southern Kentucky overseeing 1,500 funds.

When the charity was set up, the club contributed a healthy amount to start the fund. "We also encouraged our members to support the employee fund by making a tax-deductible contribution to CFMT," says General Manager/COO Michael Seabrook, CCM, CCE. There is an application process and the scholarships are available to both employees and their children. Because the program runs through an independent nonprofit, the club does not play a role in recipient selections or scholarship amounts. Up to 5% of the funds may be distributed in a given year. "We emphasize the need to continue to fund this account," says Seabrook. "We need to continue funding so the 5% of the funds is a meaningful amount."

Each applicant is required to submit an essay on why they deserve the scholarship. "Most of the scholarships have gone to children of employees over the years" says Seabrook. Each scholarship is good for one year and can be used toward an accredited two- or four-year college or vocational school. "We want to make sure these funds are available for all types of study" says Seabrook.

"We initially talked about starting a foundation at the club," he says. "Starting a foundation is a big deal and not something you develop overnight. This is how we landed with partnering with an established foundation, like CFMT."

Scholarship recipients are honored in the club's monthly newsletter, and Seabrook says there is a great deal of gratitude from the families. "Anything we can do to make BMCC an employer of choice, we should do," he says. Even with the uncertainty of the COVID-19 years, growing the program has remained a priority.

"In retrospect, I am happy we decided to partner with CFMT. It gave us an efficient way to start the program. The goal is to continue funding this important benefit to the employees. It adds to the culture of supporting our greatest asset—our team."

The Evans Scholarship

A discussion of club-based scholarships wouldn't be complete without mentioning the Western Golf Association's Evans Scholars Foundation, which offers high-achieving caddies full housing and tuition scholarships, each valued at more than \$125,000 over four years. The program started with two scholarships in 1930 and has grown to become the nation's largest privately funded scholarship program for caddies, with more than 12,000 caddies who have graduated as Evans Scholars.

Caddies apply directly for the scholarship. Managers verify their work history, and selections are made on a competitive, national basis. The average Evans Scholar has worked for three to four years and performed 165 loops on the course. They're also active in their communities and maintain excellent academics; financial hardship also plays into the equation.

"You don't need golf experience to be a good caddie," says Brian Bianchi, vice president, caddie development at the Western Golf Association. "You should be hard working and willing to serve people. It's a job that can impact any student's life, and we hope to bring in more students who don't know anything about golf. It gets them introduced to clubs where mentors work with them. It's a special opportunity."

The Evans Scholarship offers four years of full tuition at 24 participating universities, where Scholars live together in designated housing. Scholarships are funded from contributions by more than 38,500 supporters across the country who belong to the Evans Scholars Par Club program, as well as Evans Scholars Alumni and proceeds from tournaments like the BMW Championship.

"It has a big impact on their lives, and they want to pay it forward," Bianchi says. "It can mean generational change for a family. And it's great to see the outcomes of the program."


Added Benefits

Some recipients of The Country Club's scholarships are eager to share their stories with club members and other staff, and they've made videos to share about the ways these awards have changed their lives. "These stories and videos have allowed our members to connect with the results and outcome of the program, which really helps with engagement," LaCount says. "The day we announce and present the awards is my favorite day of the year."

"Post-2020, we need to think differently about recruitment," she continues. "This kind of thing is what matters to people

beyond just their salary. We have employees who feel that we have changed their lives. One employee wrote us a thank-you, saying the award their daughter received was more than they could have saved in a year. That's an eye-opening and powerful statement, and it's amazing how much of a difference this has made."

At Woodland Golf Club, scholarship awardees are celebrated with a Saturday reception at the club. Platt says the impact of the scholarship is huge. "The daughter of a member of our kitchen staff received an award, and we asked how the grant would help. The daughter said she was going to buy a computer, and that they had never had one in their home. That's kind of a big thing," says O'Connell. "You hear this story and how proud her dad was, that he'd worked there 29 years, and his employer was helping his family. What we get back is beyond money. They know we have their back. We are a community and we're treating them as equals."

"We made a video with a food service manager who's been here 34 years," says LaCount. "His daughter won a scholarship and having the two of them express what the club means to them and what this program means for their lives, helps everyone recognize the benefits of these awards. Over time, it falls into a natural state—people just get it." 



Kim Fernandez, CAE, is NCA's vice president of communications. She can be reached at fernandez@nationalclub.org.



DISCOVER THE SCS *difference*

Meet the Leadership team making the *difference*



Executive Search | Strategic Planning | Membership Growth
Employee Experience | Marketing and Communications | Branding



Results@StrategicClubSolutions.com | StrategicClubSolutions.com | 262-661-CLUB