



# FRIENDS OF SOUTHWEST DC

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## **BACKGROUND AND HISTORY**

### **The Beginning**

Friends of Southwest DC, initially established as River Park Friends (RPF), originated thanks to the foresight of residents of River Park Mutual Homes, Inc., a 1960s cooperative of high-rise and town homes built in Southwest on the rubble of the previous community, bulldozed away as part of an era of urban renewal. Some River Park residents no doubt came to the Southwest neighborhood in search of relatively inexpensive housing, but others came because of the appeal of communal living with a commitment of support for a common good.

In the late 1990s River Park member Robert S. Ziegler, who had served in African nations with US AID, promoted the notion that River Park members could and should do something similar to the US AID mission for Africa. Ziegler and three other River Parkers -- Coralie Farlee, Martin Forrester and Keith Melder -- presented an organizational proposal to the River Park Board, then headed by Donald F. Flanders. On January 26, 1998, the River Park Board established an ad hoc committee to study the feasibility of developing a grant-making organization.

The ad hoc committee discussed various options, including one of establishing a River Park Foundation. Also discussed was the possibility of the grant-giving entity becoming a task force of the Southwest Neighborhood Assembly (SWNA), given that SWNA already had the necessary IRS tax status for charitable deductions for contributions. It was thought that functioning under the SWNA 501(c)(3) authorization would enable a quick start; however, that option didn't work out so the founders decided to proceed to pursue independent status.

Initial questions were raised by some River Park members who thought that co-op fees might be raised to support this function; that this proposed "foundation" might somehow require RP units to be donated to the foundation upon death of the member; that no RP member had a sufficiently sizeable income to warrant

receiving a tax-deduction for a donation; and that there were no perceived “unmet needs” by organizations that provide programs for residents of SW DC.

After a series of meetings and consultations, on March 30, 1998, the ad hoc committee presented its recommendations to the River Park Board. Key points of its report were: donations would be completely voluntary and would have no impact on co-op fees, the organization would reserve the right to refuse any donations that were not immediately marketable (such as residential units, paintings, historic books), that it should pursue its own independent 501 (c)(3) status. The Board took note of the report and gave its sanction for River Park members to create a separate entity, River Park Friends (RPF).

### Underway

Forming a non-profit is a time-consuming, extensive, detailed process. After all the requirements of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) for 501(c)(3) nonprofit charitable organizations were fulfilled, in December of 1998, the IRS approved the group’s tax-exempt status, which was made effective as of August 27, 1998, the date the organization was officially organized. The new organization would refrain from conducting programs. Rather, its goal would be to support the programs of other Southwest 501(c)(3) charitable organizations by fundraising and making grants.

One of the first things the Friends group did was to establish a nine-member advisory board to identify needs in the Southwest area, suggest ways of responding to these needs, and offer suggestions as to fund-raising strategies. At the end of 1999, with these goals met, the advisory body went out of existence.

The first Board of Directors turned its attention to ways to keep in close contact with community needs. To publicize its work, it supplied articles to and advertised in the *Southwester* newspaper, and developed summary reports for distribution. All donors, who were then considered members of the organization, and residents of the Southwest community were invited to annual meetings at which grantees were invited to describe and tell how grants received had been used in facilitating the work of their organizations.

In 2010, the Board realized that the name of the organization might imply an exclusively River Park connection. It, therefore, polled the membership with several options for name changes. The majority voted and the Board decided to

make a name change to Friends of Southwest DC. The mission and essence continued: to pool resources available in the community so that all donations large and small could be used to the greatest effect. Since 2000 the following criteria have been those used for grants:

- (1) projects should be located geographically in Southwest Washington identified by the 20024 zip code,
- (2) the project should serve one or more of three mission goals – community development, educational support, and charity needs,
- (3) activities should be nonsectarian,
- (4) applicants should be nonprofit organizations with IRS-approved 501 (c)(3) status

In 2010, the District of Columbia updated its law governing nonprofit organizations. The change would have been onerous for FOS, a very small volunteer organization with no paid staff, since the law gives full shareholder rights to members. For most of 2012, the Board of FOS, with *pro bono* services of a DC law firm, worked on modifying the Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws to comply with the new DC law. FOS thus changed from a member to a donor organization; other necessary modifications were made. The documents were adopted at the March 2013 annual meeting.

### **Grants and donors**

In its first 1999 report the Friends groups described six grants totaling \$2,150. In 2013, FOS made ten grants to seven organizations (including two organizations new to FOS) totaling \$18,135. Awards in our early years were usually \$500 to \$1,200. More recently, awards have ranged from just over \$900 to almost \$5,000. Since 1999, over \$210,000 in grants have been awarded to 31 organizations that provide programs for residents of Southwest DC.

Donations have ranged from \$10 to over \$10,000, with the number of donors increasing over the years from around 50 annually to 85 recently; donors not affiliated with River Park now account for the majority of donors. In recent years donors have offered matching challenges resulting in a considerable increase in the total contributions. FOS is now able to accept on-line donations by credit card via [www.FriendsofSWDC.org/donate](http://www.FriendsofSWDC.org/donate).

## **The Future**

We hope to continue to become even more visible in the Southwest community and identify additional donors while encouraging our long-time donors to continue their support. We also hope that the charitable organizations for which we have been providing support continue to find our grants useful for their work and if there other such organizations in and/or serving SW residents, we hope we can identify them or that they contact us to explore making applications for grants. Finally, we want to enlarge the representation of Southwest residents on the Board to ensure that all SW perspectives are included.

For more information about FOS activities in recent years, refer to the Annual Reports for each year since 2011, on our website: [www.FriendsofSWDC.org](http://www.FriendsofSWDC.org) in the History and Annual Reports section.