

## Grant Center Program Offers Help for Nonprofits

By **ANDY MEEK** | *The Daily News*

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It's not uncommon on an afternoon in Downtown to see columns of schoolchildren stride soundlessly into the renovated Fire Engine House No. 1 at 118 Adams St., where they marvel at such exhibits as a horse-drawn steam engine, a dispatcher's radio that plays actual 911 calls and an outdoor sculpture that memorializes fire fighters who have died in the line of duty.

The Fire Museum of Memphis, which was founded in 1998, contains a number of such exhibits, as well as fire safety information and a look into local history that make it especially sought out by schools, families and tourists.

**Critical funding.** The museum is also a nonprofit entity, has a bottom line to maintain and is not immune to the budget swings of its funding sources. For the last year and a half, it has been run by Brier Turner, who has worked at several other museums in the city.

"We have only really added one new exhibit in seven years, so we haven't changed much," she said, adding that the museum has to come up with creative ways to keep bringing people back.

**Grant Center help.** It's about to get the help of some heavy-hitters in the local nonprofit world to accomplish that and more. The Fire Museum of Memphis is one of six area nonprofits recently chosen to receive some unique aid from The Grant Center, a local nonprofit that steers more than \$100 million in national grants to agencies across the Memphis area.

The other groups receiving assistance are Habitat for Humanity of Greater Memphis, the National Foundation for Transplants, Memphis Area Legal Services Inc., Memphis Theological Seminary and New Directions Inc.

**Nonprofit class.** Each recipient will participate in The Grant Center's third Program for Nonprofit Excellence class, or PNE. The class will benefit the groups in several ways: They'll collaborate with consultants, go through a training series, get an organizational assessment and, when it's all said and done, come out of the program with an aggressive plan for the future.

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**- Nancy McGee**  
CEO, The Grant Center

For nonprofits such as the fire museum, that plan could include adding new exhibits and hiring additional staff, along with other ideas that are generating excitement among the museum's board.

"This will be, I think, a great help to keep us focused outside the box, as opposed to getting bogged down in just the day-to-day," Turner said.

The class, which has garnered national attention in trade publication *Nonprofit Quarterly*, is one way The Grant Center has quietly helped reshape civic, business and government institutions in the Memphis area.

**Community service.** In its 13-year history, the center has aided such groups as the Cooper-Young Development Corp., Memphis Botanic Garden and the cities of Germantown and Olive Branch. In 2001, it helped Soulsville USA - the nonprofit that runs the Stax Museum of American Soul Music and the Stax Music Academy - snag more than \$1 million in grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Two of the center's major funding bodies are the Memphis and Shelby County governments. Its board includes members of both governments, as well as representatives from First Tennessee Bank, International Paper, the Memphis Grizzlies and Clear Channel Communications.

"Our founders wanted to create an organization that could help any type of nonprofit in the Memphis area go after national funding to leverage local giving," said Nancy McGee, CEO of The Grant Center.

**Today's funding issues.** One of the center's first national grants went to the Memphis in May International Festival in 1993. But the nonprofit world of 2005, of course, is far removed from the one that existed a decade ago, characterized today by funding shortages and competition for scant dollars.

"Funders now are looking for a lot of things from an organization before they give it money that they didn't use to," McGee said. "So what's happened is we decided to take a look at this whole area of capacity building.

"The PNE is actually our intense capacity-building program, and through it we work with a small group of nonprofits over a three-year period."

Capacity building is an area that Dwayne Spencer, executive director of Habitat for Humanity of Greater Memphis, said his group has long wrestled with.

"I want to be able to run our organization as effectively as possible, and - in the end - be able to produce as much as possible," he said. "And for us, producing means housing as many families as we can.

"But there are always these inner workings we're trying to tweak and shift and move around."

**Improving performance.** McGee said that should be a little easier with help from the PNE class, which was started in 2003 with grants from the Hearst Foundation and an anonymous donor. Groups such as Habitat for Humanity and the Fire Museum of Memphis were chosen to participate in the class based on the readiness of staff and board members and their ability to show that the group meets a strong community need.

"And basically, when they get through with the program, we're hoping that they will all be high-performing organizations that are able to meet the needs of their clients in the best way possible," McGee said.

### **Program for Nonprofit Excellence participants:**

- The Fire Museum of Memphis
- Habitat for Humanity of Greater Memphis
- National Foundation for Transplants
- Memphis Area Legal Services Inc.
- Memphis Theological Seminary
- New Directions Inc.