

# Women come to aid of other women

By VIRGINIA SWEET

Women's History Month usually puts us in mind of important events that happened years or decades or centuries ago.

But even now around the world, across our nation and here in Birmingham, women's history is being made.

Our city is part of a historic worldwide campaign to encourage high-net-worth women to make philanthropic gifts of \$1 million or more to empower women and girls. Birmingham native and longtime resident Jane Comer has committed \$1 million as part of the campaign, called Women Moving Millions. Comer's gift will be divided among three organizations, one of which is the Women's Fund of Greater Birmingham. Another beneficiary is Child-

ren's Hospital's CHIPS program toward planting a state-level initiative, Enough Abuse!, in the state of Alabama to combat childhood sexual abuse. The other part of Comer's gift will help support the Women Moving Millions campaign itself.

Sisters Helen LaKelly Hunt and Swanee Hunt, heirs to a Texas oil fortune, started women's funds in New York, Colorado and Dallas. Knowing there were women who could afford to "raise the bar" on their giving to women's causes, the Hunt sisters seeded the Women Moving Millions campaign. The campaign encourages gifts of \$1 million and more to the 130-plus member organizations of the global Women's Funding Network, of which the Women's Fund of Greater Birmingham is a member. The campaign is a candle cursing the darkness of the fi-

nancial crisis — it is closing in on its goal of \$150 million from this new and growing group of donors.

Helen Hunt, whose work on her doctoral dissertation took her deep into women's history, has determined that this is the first time in history when women have supported women's causes in a large way. She was surprised to find that even the decades-long campaign for women's suffrage was funded not by women, but by men.

Like the other donors of Women Moving Millions, Comer has found that what are sometimes called "social change investments" have a return to the donor — in the form of a deep sense of satisfaction and meaningfulness — that feels vastly greater than the gift itself. That is an enormous return on the investment.

Comer's history-making gift is a

vote of confidence in the global work of women's funds. Here in Birmingham, the Women's Fund collaborates with service providers, donors and other experts to develop community-level initiatives to address issues that disproportionately affect women and girls, such as poverty and violence. As the region's only funder exclusively for programs for women and girls, the Women's Fund develops women-led, innovative solutions to complex issues.

Countless women in our community benefit from this work. One of them was helped by Pathways Shelter. Formerly homeless and addicted to drugs, this woman is now employed and has opened a savings account. The money she is saving will help her transition to independent living in the near future. That is the kind of work women donors are

making possible.

In May — at celebrations both in Atlanta and in New York — Jane Comer and the other Women Moving Millions will be honored. They will be invited to "take their seat at the table" to join other women in history who have made a difference. We celebrate the quantum leap represented by these visionary donors, and we look forward with great hope — even at a time of financial crisis — to the great promise represented by millions more being invested in a better future for and through women and girls.

*Virginia Sweet, Ph.D., is the executive director of the Women's Fund of Greater Birmingham, a component fund of the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham. E-mail: vsweet@foundationbirmingham.org.*