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## Power of the Purse: raising confidence, self-respect in Berks County

**Susan Shelly** // June 17, 2021 // **4 Minute Read**

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 (mailto:?subject=Power of the Purse: raising confidence, self-respect in Berks County&body=Of the many grants the Power of the Purse in Berks County has awarded over the years, one particularly stands out for Chiara Renninger, who founded the philanthropic organization in... You can read the content in details following link <https%3A%2F%2Fvlb.com%2Fpower-purse-raising-confidence-self-respect-berks-county%2F>)

Of the many grants the Power of the Purse in Berks County has awarded over the years, one particularly stands out for Chiara Renninger, who founded the philanthropic organization in 2012.

The money provided several years ago to Safe Berks, an organization that provides temporary housing and support for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault, was not used to hire additional staff, programming or improve the facility. It was used to buy bus passes for program participants.

“Having a bus pass was the difference between someone being able to get to work or not,” Renninger said. “So that pass becomes the means for a woman being able to keep her job and support herself and her children. It seems like such a small thing, but it makes such a big difference.”

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In the nine years since its founding, the organization, through the Berks County Community Foundation, has awarded \$330,583 in grants to local organizations to benefit women and children. It focuses on nonprofits that work to improve confidence, self-respect, educational attainment and, particularly, the ability to find employment.

Employment is particularly important for women, many whom face barriers such as a lack of childcare or transportation, skills gaps, or lack of knowledge concerning their options.

“Employment is integral in breaking the cycle of poverty, and we want to help as many women as we can to achieve that,” Renninger said.

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Some of the organizations that have received grants in recent years include, in addition to Safe Berks, Girl Scouts of Eastern PA, Clare of Assisi House, Community Prevention Partnership, Berks Youth Chorus, Reading Recreation Commission, VOICEup Berks, Girls on the Run, Grey Muzzle Manor Sanctuary Inc. and Hannah’s Hope Ministries.

### Giving circle

Renninger describes Power of the Purse as a women’s giving circle, in which members’ donations are pooled and used to provide the grants. Group members review all grant applications, visit the organizations vying for grants, and vote to determine which organizations receive them.

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"Group members give their money individually, but as a group we get to decide and vote on where the money goes," Renninger explained.

She was inspired to start the group after attending a women's giving circle event in the Lehigh Valley. When founded, the Power of the Purse had 12 members, now it has about 50.

"We've found there's a real interest in this method of helping," Renninger said. "When donations are pooled, they can create a bigger impact than they would individually."

Gifts from Power of the Purse are unrestricted, meaning that organizations can use the money for any purpose they wish. That flexibility, allows nonprofits to think outside of the box and use money for projects that might otherwise go unfunded.

"I think these grants fill a charitable need that the community would otherwise be missing," she said.

Leah Fassnacht, director of communications and marketing at the **Greater Reading Chamber Alliance** (</profile/greater-reading-chamber-alliance/>), said Power of the Purse has been particularly beneficial during the pandemic, when some agencies have struggled to make ends meet.

#### 'Fantastic organization'

"GRCA applauds the work of this fantastic organization," Fassnacht said. "At a time when many nonprofits may be struggling to provide the needed programs to the people they serve, Power of the Purse has stepped up and helped fill in those gaps."

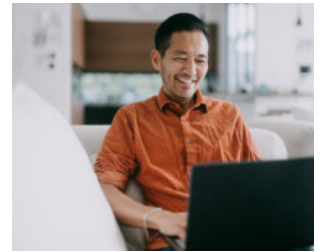
Girls on the Run Berks County, which serves girls in grades three through eight with programming designed to encourage self-confidence, skills development, emotional and physical health and camaraderie, recently received a \$5,000 grant from Power of the Purse.

The money, explained Kirsten Haas, Girls on the Run's executive director, will be used to provide scholarships for girls who wish to participate but cannot afford the \$150 program fee.

"For us, that is a significant amount of money for our scholarship fund," Haas said. "This grant helps us tremendously in being able to continue giving those scholarships to girls at a time when they are needing connections more than they ever have. This pandemic has put an additional financial strain on many families, so it's important for us to be able to help."

While a range of organizations have benefited from the Power of the Purse over the years, there are significant benefits for members as well, including education regarding issues facing the community, Renninger.

Having grown up in Berks County she was unaware of some issues the community deals with, such as sex trafficking. When FREE – Freedom and Restoration for Everyone Enslaved – applied for and was awarded a grant from Power of the Purse, her eyes were opened to the problem.



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"I wouldn't have known about that or some of the other problems that need to be dealt with in our community if it hadn't been for that grant," Renninger said. "I think other members feel the same way."

Membership is open to anyone, and the organization is always seeking additional members. Participants are asked to donate a minimum of \$1,000 a year if they are older than 35, or \$500 a year if they are 35 years or younger.

The group, which has been interacting virtually throughout the pandemic, meets four times a year, with one meeting a celebration of the organizations that received grants.

"I want the time commitment to be minimal, but the impact to be great," Renninger said.

Members range in age from mid-to-late-70s to 20-somethings, with several mother-daughter members.

Renninger praised the Berks Community Foundation, which manages Power of the Purse's funds.

"We wouldn't be able to do it without Berks Community Foundation," she said. "Their wealth of knowledge and expertise has been amazing."

Any organization that would like to apply for a grant or anyone interested in joining Power of the Purse can get more information at <https://bccf.org/pop>.

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