



FOUNDER & VISION-KEEPER: JOHN BAIRD

St. Croix Valley Foundation Founding Board Chair John Baird talks with current Board Chair Sue Gerlach about the Foundation's history and future as well as the impact of the *Forever We Are Stronger* endowment campaign. The campaign aims to increase unrestricted endowed funds, which can be directed by the board to wherever need is greatest.

In 1995, a group of committed citizens with a vision for the St. Croix Valley were gathered in a basement conference room in Stillwater. Everyone around that table saw opportunity in the St. Croix Valley. And they knew that people who had the capacity to make significant charitable gifts, as well as the civic and philanthropic nature to do so, needed a local foundation to execute the goals being discussed.

"Before we entered the picture there were only a couple of funders that could support projects in this area," recalled John Baird. "And the path to their door was becoming a deep trench from everyone treading the same ground to those limited funding sources."

The newly created St. Croix Valley Community Foundation (now known as the St. Croix Valley Foundation) would be a nonprofit organization that could accept charitable donations, invest funds for the long term, and manage impact-producing grants back to the community.

By the time that basement meeting wrapped up, John Baird had a new role. As he tells it, "I was sitting at the end of the conference room table. When talk of leadership came up someone said, 'Well, you're at the head of the table, John - so I think you may as well be chairman.'" The group had a great deal of respect for John's leadership, his keen understanding of the Valley and his vision for what a community foundation could accomplish in this region. John Baird became St. Croix Valley Community Foundation's first board chair.

Fast forward 25 years. John is still a commanding presence at any table and still talks passionately about the St. Croix Valley Foundation's role in this region. From the beginning, the Foundation aimed to become a locally-supported, locally-managed funding source for projects that would enhance the quality of life throughout the Valley.

That mission still drives today's board, led by Sue Gerlach, and it remains the driving force behind the "Together We Are Stronger" endowment campaign. Today the Foundation has nearly \$70 million in philanthropic assets under management. While that growth is impressive, the majority of that funding is designated by donors for specific projects and uses.

The 'Together We Are Stronger' endowment campaign has been raising unrestricted funds that can be distributed by the board to address pressing needs in the region. The endowed nature of campaign gifts means this unrestricted funding source will be available forever.

John explained his support for the campaign on a recent visit. "Gifts to the endowment campaign provide the funding that the board can use to address the more complex issues facing our region."

"The best way for St. Croix Valley Foundation to honor the vision and commitment of its founders is by focusing on the future," notes current board chair Sue Gerlach. "Endowment campaign funding means we can continue to impact this region long into the future - a future where needs still exist but so do the means to address them."