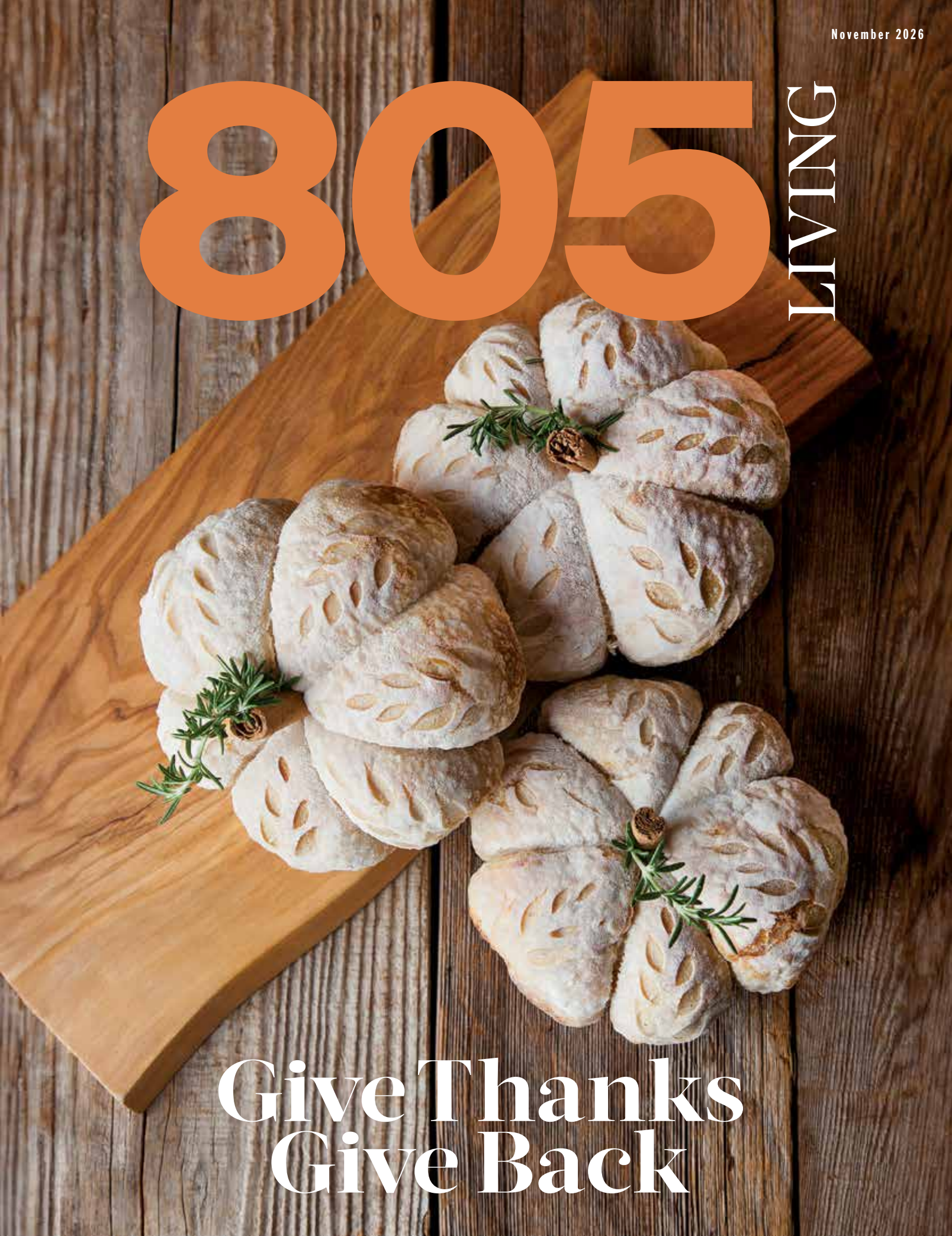
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805 LIVING



Give Thanks Give Back

A Virtuous Circle

The Women's Fund of Santa Barbara embraces collective philanthropy, helping women, children, and families to survive and thrive.

BY **JOAN TAPPER**

A grid of images (opposite) hints at the broad range of Women's Fund contributions to community needs. Over the decades, the nonprofit has invested in organizations working in family support, housing, mental health, health care, early childhood and youth support, education, food security and nutrition, and personal safety.

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP, LEFT: © MARC BORDONS/STOCKSY UNITED; TIM MOSSHOLDER/UNSPLASH; © TARIK KIZILKAYA/STOCKSY UNITED; © INA PETERS/STOCKSY UNITED









CAROLYN JABS, CHAIR OF THE BOARD of directors of the **Women's Fund of Santa Barbara,** (womensfundsb.org) remembers clearly what first really grabbed her about the organization. She had arrived in Santa Barbara in 2013, and with an interest in local philanthropic opportunities, joined the group as an individual. But attending its annual celebration of grant recipients in 2015 was a revelation. "To hear how these grantees talked about the impact the grants would make was moving," she says. "It blew my mind." The energy in the room was palpable, and the ability to pool resources and *collectively* do something constructive especially resonated with her. "I had organizations I gave money to," she adds, "but this was a chance to give with other women and give significant grants."

That notion of women pooling money for the community's benefit was key from the beginning. The Women's Fund was begun in 2004 as a giving circle by a dozen local women who wanted a different approach to philanthropy—no galas, no silent auctions, no paddle raises. Perri Harcourt, one of the founders, remembers, "It started with conversations. We wanted to target women and children, and we wanted families to thrive and survive."

They came up with three basic principles: the group would respond to critical community needs with meaningful gifts; the fund would be a catalyst for bringing women together for collective philanthropy; and it would help educate and inspire women to become leaders in philanthropy.

The first year, 67 women took part, each donating $2,500 or more, some of which went toward two grants totaling $140,000. Some two decades later, the organization is one of the biggest—if not *the* biggest—giving circle in the country, with 1,450-plus members and grants in 2026 that amounted to a whopping $1.375 million divided among 10 nonprofits.

More than the growth, more than the money, it's the way the Women's Fund operates that's so remarkable. Initially, it relied on the Santa Barbara Foundation as a fiscal sponsor, but it has been a 501c3 since 2020. And except for a few operational contractors (for an accountant and database and website maintenance), this is a volunteer organization, with a grassroots, collective aspect to everything it does.

Identifying grantees is the work of volunteers who continually assess South Santa Barbara County's critical needs for women, children, and families and then seek out local agencies with programs to address those. These nonprofits are then vetted for financial stability and compliance with regulations, questioned about what the money would accomplish, and asked about the how they'd sustain the program after the grant is over. The top groups go on a ballot that's presented to the members in December.

There are still a lot of individuals who earn a vote for a contribution of at least $2,750, but, early on, the idea of membership changed. "We wanted to be inclusive versus exclusive," says Harcourt, "and inspire local women to get involved and contribute." Now more than 100 affinity groups—church members, walking groups, retirement home residents, sorority sisters, you name it—pool members' smaller donations to earn a vote. "Everyone gets to learn and voice an opinion," she adds.

It's important that each group meets at least once before the vote to exchange their collective intelligence. "They share insights on what the community needs," notes Jabs, "and about what is effective. [It's also] a way we give women a place where they can grow more sophisticated about philanthropy in the company of other women." That's valuable knowledge today, when women control a third of the assets in the U.S.

New this year to the Women's Fund is the Small Grants Pilot Project, which will offer $10,000 or $25,000—a total of $100,000—to smaller agencies, and for which members voted individually in October.

Over the decades, 173 programs and 80 nonprofits—dealing with safe childcare, mental well-being, senior day care, reproductive health, and food security, among others—have received a total of $14,120,000. Even groups on the ballot that do not receive funds benefit, since the research process puts them on the community's radar and serves as a seal of approval.

"This is different from just writing a check," says Jabs. "It's a lot of women volunteering and collaborating to find out how to do work in the community." ♦

Extending the Reach

The Women's Fund of Santa Barbara focuses on Southern Santa Barbara County. Other giving circles in the 805 area—each with its own rules for grantees and methods of awarding grants—include **Ojai Women's Fund** (ojaiwomensfund.org) and **Ventura County's 100 Women Who Care** (100womenvc.com).

If you're interested in forming a giving circle in your community, reach out to the **Ventura County Community Foundation** (vccf.org), the **Santa Barbara Foundation** (sbfoundation.org), or **The Community Foundation of San Luis Obispo County** (cfsloco.org). They can offer advice and fiscal sponsorship. Also, **Philanos** (philanos.org) is a national network and a source of information that links women's giving circles across the county.

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Contributions from the Women's Fund of Santa Barbara not only add to the grantee's bottom line, they also add a bounce to its reputation along with broader recognition. "When I think of the Women's Fund," says Perri Harcourt, a founder of the organization, "I think of the ties that bind. We're a network and a safety net."