

WHLDC awards \$2 million in grants to 83 community non-profits

The grants, which are expected to reach almost 12,000 people in West Harlem, fund local programs ranging from workforce training to gymnastics to opera.

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Christian Zhang for Spectator

The West Harlem Local Development Corporation announced the winners of about \$2 million in grants for local nonprofits during a ceremony Thursday, a move that will fund [83 neighborhood organizations](#) serving residents of West Harlem.

The grants, which are expected to reach almost 12,000 people in West Harlem, fund local programs ranging from workforce training to gymnastics to opera, and represent the largest expenditures to date of the [WHLDC](#), which is responsible for doling out \$76 million promised by Columbia as a part of the Community Benefits Agreement signed in May of 2009.

"It's a wonderful, wonderful feeling to know, after many years on this board, that we've finally reached the day where we're going to see the funds allocated in the community," Kofi Boateng, the executive director of the development corporation said at a Community Board 9 meeting Thursday evening.

Programs received grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$50,000, and are required to use them on projects that primarily benefit residents in Community Board 9, which includes Morningside Heights, Manhattanville, and Hamilton Heights. Although living in these neighborhoods is not a requirement for receiving funding, Boateng said 39 of the 83 winners are based in the CB9 area, and that they won a total of \$977,000.

"They represent diversity in focus—there are arts and cultural, education groups ... which fulfill different needs," Boateng said at the celebration of the grant recipients Thursday morning at Our Children's Foundation on 125th Street.

Grant recipients said they were excited to receive a chunk of the funds and ready to

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work on a variety of programs within the community. Max Rodriguez, founder of the Harlem Book Fair, said the organization received \$12,000 for its “Cool Boyz Read” program, which offers weekly reading programs for male third- and fourth-graders at a West Harlem school.

“It’s amazing to be acknowledged as a steward of Harlem’s future,” said Rodriguez, who remarked that expanding reading would help “break the school-to-prison pipeline” in disadvantaged neighborhoods. “I’m just ecstatic.”

Not all has been smooth sailing for the corporation. Since the group was founded in 2009, locals have criticized it for being inefficient and ineffective. Until Thursday, the group had only given out a single grant. The controversies prompted a leadership shuffle in April 2012, with Boateng being appointed director. [An investigation](#) by State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman completed in December found no misuse of funds.

Those in attendance at the event said they thought the organization had overcome its challenges, and were happy to see the first of the long-awaited grants being dispensed.

“They were all complaining. Now it’s quiet,” Boateng said of his organization’s critics. “They’ve seen action, they’ve seen responses.”

Several recipients said the grant would help them grow as a group. Joseph Hayes, a member of the men’s mentorship group Brothers in Recovery, called the process an “excellent opportunity” for the corporation. His organization was funded \$16,250 to hold a retreat and workshops about health and self defense.

Another recipient, Wendy Hillard, whose namesake foundation received \$9,750 to hold gymnastics classes for locals at Riverbank State Park, said the corporation’s ability to fund local groups “really makes a difference.”

The corporation [received 101 applications](#) requesting a combined \$18.5 million in grants.

“We decided that we would go wide versus deep,” Boateng said, choosing a large number of small grants over a few very large ones. He said the long-term goal of the corporation was to build a “community trust fund” to support local organizations.

A second round of grants will open in June, with awards to be distributed in September. Boateng said at the CB9 meeting that he hoped the WHLDC would continue operating even after it finished awarding the Columbia funds. That would involve finding other funding sources for the long-term.

Casey Tolan contributed reporting.

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