In following the hundreds of millions of philanthropic dollars spread throughout western Pennsylvania by its regional foundations each year, you would have to get out your magnifying glass to find the tiny grant awarded to a scrappy group of high school students in one of Pittsburgh’s struggling rust-belt communities.

I’m aware of it because it came from The Heinz Endowments. But even from our pot, from which about $65 million is dispensed annually, the $6,000 awarded by our Education Program to equip McKeesport Area Technical High School’s Team 1708 for a regional robotics tournament warrants only a few words’ reference on our “approved grants” list.

Still, that comparison is only in financial terms. As I’ve discovered time and again in the work of philanthropy, big grants do not always yield big results. Conversely, some small-grant recipients have astounded us with their outsized impact.

In fulfilling the underlying mission of Endowments grantmaking last year—investing in programs and services that push the region beyond settling for “good enough” and renewing passions for growth and renewal—it’s the smaller grantees working in the shadow of large institutions that often are better positioned to inspire such change.

There is an especially instructive story in the journey of 11 McKeesport Area Tech School students who formed Team 1708 and found themselves behind the curve in training for a regional competition in March involving 32 teams from the eastern United States and Canada.

The competition, part of the national FIRST program (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology), which the Endowments funded locally with a $200,000 grant last year, is exciting but also intimidating, even for the experienced, well-funded teams that compete regularly.

When the fledgling McKeesport team scanned the sophisticated FIRST web site, there was a lot of trepidation. “I just said to them, ‘Do you want to do this? Do you believe you can gain something important, just from competing?’ ” remembers engineering teacher and team coach Mike Dischner.

The students poured hearts and souls into preparation. In the beginning, the goal was “to do the research and try to have a good time,” says Dischner. But the competitive spirit took hold early. The students came up with their own distinctive team name to spice up the bland “1708” designation assigned for the competition: “Natural Selection,” referring to Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution and its “survival-of-the-fittest” tenet. Even the robot they built and programmed in dozens of evening and weekend work sessions is named “Charles.”

“These guys started with their heads down but they caught on fire,” says Dischner. “That seemed to make a difference in our lack of experience.” When the team carted Charles into the Petersen Center on March 10 for the weekend competition, they were carrying repair tools in a Shop’n Save grocery bag. But the team did have the makings of a winning strategy, concentrating on forming alliances and specializing in defensive moves in a contest that requires robots to stack large pyramid-shaped game pieces on a grid in a specific sequence.

By sticking to its strategy—forging alliances with other teams and making the most of unforeseen opportunities—Team 1708 went from near bottom of the pack of 30 teams to win the regional competition and a trip to Atlanta for the finals. The Endowments’ Economic Opportunity Program followed up with a grant to cover some of the costs.

In that contest, where experience and resources run at the highest level, Team 1708 finished a respectable 23rd out of 85 teams. Still, Dischner feared that his students would be discouraged after sitting as non-winners through two hours of a closing awards ceremony. Instead, after a breakfast stop on the long drive back to Pittsburgh, the students presented their teacher with a new robot design they had sketched out on the back of a placemat.

“Look. We’re coming out of McKeesport. We’re not as experienced or well-equipped as some of the others out there. But we have some things to offer, and we’re going to go the whole way, and we’re going to compete with the best.”

Mike Dischner teacher-coach of McKeesport Area Technical High School’s Robotics Competition Team 1708

I pull out Team 1708–Natural Selection and the FIRST Robotics Competition program from among the hundreds of other 2004 grantees because, together, they offer dramatic fulfillment of a key goal of our grantmaking last year: to spur southwestern Pennsylvanians to take on a competitive drive and passion that rejects the lifestyle of reduced expectations and demands the highest quality-of-life standards.
Certainly, that has been the case in programs funded last year through our Civic Design Initiative, which promotes quality design for public spaces in the built and natural environments. At its inception four years ago, the initiative was envisioned by Howard Heinz Endowment Chairman Teresa Heinz as a grantmaking vehicle to push the region to demand the best of itself by insisting on world-class design and green, user-friendly components in public projects.

Since then, the initiative’s highest hopes have become the standards. With the international competition that resulted in New York architect Rafael Viñoly’s award-winning design of the new David L. Lawrence Convention Center as a model, several other high-profile public projects have followed with their own competitions. Chief among them: the nationally celebrated design for the Pittsburgh Children’s Museum on the city’s North Side, guided by Rebecca Flora, head of the Green Building Alliance, an Endowments grantee, and the remarkably inclusive design selection process for the national Flight 93 Memorial, recognizing southwestern Pennsylvania’s tragic connection to September 11.

In concrete-and-asphalt–dense Oakland, the Endowments was among several foundations contributing to the Schenley Plaza green-space project, with more than $1 million in total appropriations to the Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy. The plan calls for an Oakland community green that serves as a public gathering place but also as a grand entrance to Schenley Park.

Beyond the physical landscape, our efforts to instill high quality-of-life expectations and a culture of confidence in the region’s ability to meet them also progressed last year in our traditional grantmaking areas.

The Endowments directed $1.5 million in grants to a new Environmental Health Initiative that promises to make Pittsburgh a national pioneer in green hospital practices; establishes a research and education base in environmental connections to health through the University of Pittsburgh’s Graduate School of Public Health; and supports advocacy groups to mitigate air and water pollution in the region.

The Environment Program also moved forward last year in a long-running strategy to promote smart growth and more livable cities with about $1 million in support to the statewide environmental group 10,000 Friends to create the Campaign to Renew PA, an organization committed to implementing the recommendations of the Endowments-William Penn Foundation–funded Brookings Institution report, “Back to Prosperity: A Competitive Agenda for Renewing Pennsylvania.” Its release two years ago generated widespread public support for addressing serious economic problems tied directly to decades-old policies that promote sprawl and fragmented government.

Staff in the Arts & Culture and Economic Opportunity Programs also developed grantmaking strategies that attempted to push the region to thinking beyond daily negative headlines around the City of Pittsburgh’s financial crisis, fragmented county government, poor tax structure and a lackluster regional economy.

In a show of confidence, the Endowments’ Economic Opportunity Program continued work to move local governments to more efficient and productive footing with $300,000 in funding to the Pennsylvania Economy League for research into the potential benefits of city and county government consolidation.

In the arts and culture arena, the Endowments moved forward with a $4 million planning and construction grant in anchor support of the planned $33 million African American Cultural Center to be located in the heart of downtown. Another vote of confidence in the future of downtown Pittsburgh came in the awarding of $1 million toward the construction of new dance studios and performance space at center-city–based Point Park University.

Sprinkled around these large grants was sustainability funding for scores of small arts groups. Arts & Culture staff also guided Cultural District performance groups in developing new ways to address chronic budget problems.

Similar large-and-small–grantee funding was adopted by the Education Program last year to improve educational systems in southwestern Pennsylvania. A second $1 million grant to St. Vincent College in Latrobe, Westmoreland County, was awarded to support construction of an early childhood education center named after the late children’s television luminary, Fred Rogers. The center, which will provide training for early childhood educators, was balanced with another $1 million grant, formed through a collaboration of our Education and
Children, Youth & Families programs, going directly to a statewide advocacy effort to encourage Pennsylvania school districts now receiving state aid to create pre-kindergarten programs.

In support of a collaboration between the Education and Environment Programs, $1 million was awarded to replace the aging fleet of watercraft in the Pittsburgh Voyager program, a rivers-based, youth science-and-environment—education program. In other education grantmaking, a total of $700,000 went to two groups committed to developing more charter school opportunities in the state; and a total of $350,000 went to community partnerships that improved access to wireless networks and information sharing. A new Endowments grantee, A+ Schools, was supported with a total of $600,000 in funding to further its efforts to act as an independent community monitor and guide for improving education in the Pittsburgh Public Schools.

Anxious to develop new sources of economic opportunity in the region, the Endowments continued its partnership with several regional foundations in funding the Pittsburgh Life Sciences Greenhouse. Last year, our $1.5 million contribution ensured continued growth of the universities—state government—foundations collaboration to turn biomedical research spinoffs into a new industry for the region.

But our investments in Pittsburgh’s economic future did not distract us from working to meet the needs of the existing employment base by assisting younger workers struggling to compete in a global economy. As Vira I. Heinz Endowment Chairman James Walton wrote in this magazine last year: “Every time one new worker is added to the workforce or another augments his training and moves to a better job, the region itself becomes more competitive.”

To that end, the Endowments provided nearly $1 million for several nonprofit organizations’ programs offering technical training and work-skills development. In addition, a significant portion of the more than $300,000 awarded in several grants to the Community College of Allegheny County were directed at laying the groundwork for a new initiative to improve management and teaching at each of the region’s five community colleges.

Young people in some of Pittsburgh’s most troubled neighborhoods also were at the center of a new $100,000 Endowments-funded partnership with Allegheny County’s Department of Human Services, the first response to a record 122 homicides recorded in Allegheny County last year, most involving young African-American men.

In responding to a more insidious health threat to the region’s young people—childhood obesity—the CY&F staff also began seed funding last year—an $80,000 grant—for research into the causes behind the alarming increase in numbers of obese children in the region. The CY&F Program also responded to another community emergency, joining with other regional grantmakers and Allegheny County government to provide relief to business owners and residents devastated in last fall’s flooding from Hurricane Ivan. The Endowments awarded a total of $200,000 to two local nonprofit groups assisting residents in recovery efforts. An additional $500,000 from the foundation went to a county program managed through the Pittsburgh Foundation that has provided no-interest loans to repair damaged businesses.

The emergency flood relief work is just one example of first-level grantmaking—meeting such pressing needs as natural disaster recovery, worker retraining and ending youth homicides with the goal of rescuing the region from its deficits.

The second and much more complicated level of our work is to provide guidance and fund programs that challenge this region to strive for more than stability. We must develop the confidence to take risks and embrace national competition for new businesses and new residents even when all the resources might not be in place.

It’s heartening that these two levels of philanthropy come together with such powerful results for the 11 high school students of Team 1708–Natural Selection, the FIRST program and the communities around them. As the Endowments works to achieve a similar outcome for the region as a whole, I would offer only one revision—that we need not be bound to the “natural selection” label. The people of southwestern Pennsylvania have proved their ability to survive and evolve. Now, it’s time to compete for the best.