

FRAN MAHONEY
WFNH founder
By Shirley Elder

When it comes to money, Fran Mahoney follows her heart. She's not independently wealthy, but she has invested wisely. She's "adopted" girls in three countries, Guatemala, Honduras, and French Guinea, taken in an old cat from the local animal shelter, and become a founder of the Women's Fund of New Hampshire.

"I love animals and I love people, particularly women and girls," she said as she sat in her Bedford living room surrounded by packing boxes, and watched closely by her large, well-loved mixed-breed cat, "Sevie".

Mahoney's estate plan reflects those loves. And being efficient, a professional thinker, really, she put it in writing. "I said, ok, I'm going to cover these things that benefit people and animals" -- Childreach, which identifies underprivileged children in other countries and tries to improve their lives and communities; the World Wildlife Fund, which seeks to protect endangered animals; and the Women's Fund, which seeks to aid needy women and girls throughout New Hampshire.

In fact, that's how she came to be a "founder" of the Women's Fund. "I didn't know that's what I was doing," she said of her estate plan. "I just said I think I'll do something to contribute."

It's worked out well. "It's been very interesting to watch the Women's Fund develop, and to see its vision unfold," she said. For her part, Mahoney has taken the lead in one of the WFNH's major tasks, grant making. "It's so much fun," she said, "to see the ideas people come up with to improve the lot of women and girls."

But now Mahoney is off on another adventure, Mexico.

She sold her house in Bedford, donated some paintings to the Women's Fund auction, stored some stuff, and now, with her companion, Homer Cates, a retired computer engineer with Digital Equipment, they are moving to San Miguel de Allende, a picturesque 16th Century resort town of 80,000 in central Mexico. They're taking two suitcases each, his-and-her laptop computers, Homer's guitar and, of course, Sevie.

Fran Mahoney doesn't look like an impetuous person. She wears her hair short, prefers comfortable shoes, smiles easily, and describes herself as "almost a native" of New Hampshire (born across the border in Gloucester, MA, and raised in Nashua). But her life has taken unpredictable turns.

Like many good Catholic girls, Mahoney entered a convent, the Sisters of Mercy, as a teenager, gaining an English degree from St. Mary's College and a master's from Catholic University. She taught for a while, and then she was offered a chance for more education. So she went off to Boston College, won a doctorate in counseling psychology, and therein lies a tale: she left the Sisters of Mercy.

It happened in Boston. As a graduate student, Mahoney said she found a freedom she had never known in 16 years as a nun. "Everything changed," she said. "I could tell I wasn't the same person. I said this really isn't my life anymore." It was 1973, a time of turmoil in the country, the Catholic Church and Fran Mahoney.

Newly independent and back in New Hampshire, Mahoney stayed with higher education, specializing in adult learning and professional development, and working in almost every corner of the University System of New Hampshire. The longest stint,

1979-1998, was with the School for Lifelong Learning, now Granite State College. In 2005, she won the college's distinguished service award.

But the learning never stops. In San Miguel, she plans to study and become fluent in Spanish, to find new friends, carve out a new career. "My life is always about what lies ahead," she said. "Today's interesting. Tomorrow might be more interesting. Who knows what will happen?"

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