

By JENNIFER SPRAGUE, Press staff

HADDAM — More than 200 women — and a handful of men — gathered at the Riverhouse at Goodspeed Station Monday evening to support the Middlesex County Community Foundation's Fund for Women & Girls.

Featuring a conversation with Durham author and television series creator Amy Bloom, the benefit is held once every two years for an endowed fund that supports programs empowering Middlesex County women and girls to be self-reliant and reach their full potential.

Until magazine racks are filled with pictures of chubby, bald men who "aren't rich but are simply known as eye candy — until that day, we need this fund," Bloom said.

"I don't think these kinds of funds are luxuries," she said. "I would say skip the manicure. You look fantastic. Put a little more money into the fund."

Established in 2001 by a group of 58 women who each gave \$1,000, the fund has since awarded grants for programs targeted to women and girls in areas including job training, health care, conflict resolution, parenting skills and domestic violence.

"We've provided funds for a shelter for battered women. We've supported an exercise program for adolescent girls because, while there are plenty of competitive sports, girls who don't wish to compete in competitive sports find it hard to find exercise opportunities," said Ann Faust, vice-president of operations for the Middlesex County Community Foundation.

Bloom spoke about her influences as a writer and as a woman. Growing up with a head of curls and pink glasses, she said, "I didn't find life easy on the playground."

She did, however, turn to books, and considers teachers and librarians among her greatest influences. Her parents, too, were "the other thing that made a great difference in my life."

"If you don't want your daughters to have an eating disorder, don't sigh when you look in the mirror," she said.

Lead by example, she said, and let it be OK for them to "do as I do."

Durham First Selectwoman Laura Francis asked Bloom what types of programs could be offered to young women to start them writing earlier.

"Arts programs are not optional in public schools," Bloom said, the room erupting in thunderous applause. "They are essential."

Programs teaching music, critical thinking and writing are never a waste, she said.

Bloom — the author of two novels, two collections of short stories and the Lifetime television series, "State of Mind" — also discussed her writing process.

"Characters lead me to their stories," she said. "The people I meet lead me to their stories. All of my work is character driven. I have to push myself to find the plot."

Bloom said she always starts her work by developing a character, which leads her to the plot and the theme. She also tries to stay disciplined by sitting down and working for eight hours every day.

"I sometimes think being a writer is like being a farmer of a subsistence farm," she said. "You never get much, but you have to show up every day."

According to statistics from the foundation, women and girls represent 78 percent of the nation's poor; women represent 72 percent of the elderly poor; women working full-time earn 72 percent of what men earn working full-time; women are more likely than men to face domestic abuse, inadequate housing and sub-standard health care; and despite the critical need, less than 6 percent of charitable giving goes to programs specifically targeted to women and girls.

Cynthia Clegg, president and CEO of the Middlesex County Community Foundation, said despite a tough economy, Monday's event sold out.

"With everything going on in the world, you are here to celebrate women and girls," she said, thanking the crowd for their support.

For more information about the Fund for Women & Girls, call (860) 347-0025 or visit MiddlesexCountyCF.org.