

... giving to others

Hands 4HOPE

By LYNN MACHON



Life Lessons from
Our Youth

EL DORADO HILLS-BASED Hands4Hope has accomplished more community service projects over the last two years than many organizations could even dream of completing.

It comes as no surprise then, that the tireless energy behind the effort is largely generated by youth. The ambitious school-age group does everything from provide meals and warm clothing to homeless families in Sacramento and Placerville to organize group birthday parties for local underprivileged kids closer to home.

In fact, this motivated bunch of young idealists isn't just making our community a better place by helping those in need, it's inspiring the "me" generation of yesterday to become the "we" generation of today.

Raising Socially Responsible Youth

Serrano resident and founder Jennifer Bassett is the driving force behind Hands4Hope, yet she's quick to acknowledge her children are her motivation. "My two sons were the inspiration for creating the organization," says Bassett. "I really wanted them to grow up to be socially responsible citizens, but I was beginning to see a little sense of entitlement."

"We live in a wonderful community, but I think our kids need to be aware there are people who don't live like us, and experience the reality of what life is like for others too. And they need to be empowered to help where they can."

After talking with several other parents who felt the same way, Bassett launched Hands4Hope - Youth Making a Difference in March 2008. Today, 205 local kids, along with many of their parents, participate in life-changing outreach activities throughout El Dorado and Sacramento counties.



Youth-Driven by Design

Without a doubt, the feature that best differentiates Hands4Hope from other community service organizations is the heavy involvement of local kids, ages five to 18.

From concept to completion, young people help identify needs in the community, create outreach ideas, and promote and provide the manpower to realize their goals.

Led by a Youth Advisory Council that is mentored by a Parent Advisory Council, the organization - to keep everyone on track - holds monthly meetings in three grade-specific groups, Team Hope (K-5th grades), Team Dream (6th-8th) and Team Inspire (9th-12th).

Experiences of a Lifetime

Andie Horning is president of Hands4Hope's Team Inspire and a junior at Oak Ridge High School. She recently helped spearhead a wildly successful care package drive to benefit soldiers overseas, but admits she prefers face-to-face activities.

"I really like the hands-on projects, where I'm interacting with people and I can see firsthand how what we're doing affects them," Horning says. "It's been a great experience to go to different places and talk to people I wouldn't really talk to."

As an example, the teen recalls having an in-depth conversation with a homeless man while passing out free lunches. "The experience opened me up to a completely different awareness and helped me to understand how people can get into those situations," she says.

Like Horning, most Hands4Hope youth volunteers seem to recognize that by most accounts, they live a sheltered life in El Dorado Hills. They see community outreach as an opportunity to cultivate greater personal empathy in the "real world."

LEFT: Alexander Allen lends a helping "hand" by collecting donated food and other items at the March Food Bank Blitz. The "blitz" netted more than 5,000 lbs. of canned food and almost 7,500 in cash and gift certificates. TOP: Both food items and donations were collected to help local food banks.



Olivia Allen holds one of several Hands 4 Hope donation jars placed throughout the community that collected \$7,400 in cash and gift certificates for a local homeless outreach during the March Food Bank Blitz.

"When we first started working with the younger kids at a local affordable housing complex, I fell in love with the project," says 16-year-old Lauren Swan. "It has helped me see what else is out in the world and the hardships that others face, things that I had never thought about."

As a result, she says she's learned to never take anything for granted. "Many of the people around me don't see how much they really have, or realize how lucky they are."

Lessons Learned

For Bassett, a major focus for Hands4Hope is "service learning," a new buzz word in both the education and community service worlds. "Service learning means not only doing an outreach project, but educating the kids about why we are doing it and then reviewing the project with them afterward," she explains.

As part of that educational component, Bassett occasionally organizes unconventional speakers for monthly meetings. "We've had actual homeless people come talk to the kids about their lives," she says. "And the middle school kids recently asked that someone from Child Protective Services come explain to them how the foster care system works and what more they can do to help."

Filling a Void for Local Food Banks

One of the organization's biggest ventures is a regional canned food drive to fill food bank shelves in otherwise bare times of the year.

Hands4Hope's "Food Bank Blitz" in March netted an impressive 5,012 pounds of canned goods and \$7,400 in cash and gift certificates to benefit both the Food Bank of El Dorado County and the Twin Lakes

Food Bank in Folsom as well as Hands4Hope's outreach programs.

Kathy Boone, executive director of the Twin Lakes Food Bank, values the partnership with Hands4Hope. "It's just a wonderful, well-organized agency with a great deal of integrity," she says. "Even just the gift cards to grocery stores they collect have been a big help to us, especially for special needs," says Boone. "For instance, we have a woman with throat cancer who needs no-salt canned goods and fresh foods. We don't usually get those things through donations, so now we're able to give her a \$20 gift card to help her out."

Boone believes that having visible youth participation increases the food drive success. "Customers definitely respond better to the youth requesting donations than to us adults," she admits, but also credits the group's exceptional leader. "Jennifer is a lovely person, very passionate about helping others and about teaching young people to care about community service."

Taking Meals to the Homeless

Another local resident, Denise Chisick, and her family have been involved with Hands4Hope since inception.

The Chisicks recently participated in one of their favorite monthly programs. "A bunch of us got together in the little room in the back of Raley's to make bean and cheese burritos, and pack lunches with fruit and cookies," says the mom of four. "Then we all caravanned to Sacramento to hand out meals to those in need." She estimates the group delivers 200 to 250 meals on an average day.

Chisick says her 11-year-old daughter, Kaela, looks forward to passing out meals because she says it makes her feel good inside. "She was a little shocked at first when she saw someone living in his car with all his belongings," says Chisick, acknowledging her kids are learning tough but valuable lessons in empathy and appreciation that they won't find in books.

"As parents, we can talk to our kids all day long about how great they have it, but until they actually experience how others less fortunate live, it's just words," she emphasizes.

How You Can Get Involved

All K-12 kids and their families are welcome.

Hands4Hope has an immediate need for more adult volunteers to supervise outreach, and would welcome as-needed professional help from both a grant writer and an attorney. Those interested in volunteering or making cash or in-kind donations can find more information at www.hands4hopeyouth.org.



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Rolling Hills middle schooler Griffin Baum helps load donated food items into Hands4Hope food bins at the March Food Bank Blitz.

In Partnership with the Community

Bassett is the first to admit her organization couldn't be successful without the generosity of the local community.

In addition to valuable support from Hands4Hope board members, the schools and food banks, the group relies on key community partners like Wells Fargo Bank, the Vision Coalition of El Dorado Hills, Gold Key Storage, El Dorado Hills Community Service District (CSD) and Raley's/Bel Air, among others.

She's also excited about collaboration in the works with Town Center and the Mansour Company. "The business community is amazing – they've come together in whatever way they can to support us," says Bassett.

No Texting during Meetings, Please

Bassett's admiration for Hands4Hope's youth understandably runs deep. "I am constantly amazed by our youth and the

incredible work they are doing," she says. "Last year, even while going to school and maintaining other commitments, our youth logged 2,190 volunteer hours. Six even received the President's Volunteer Service Award, an amazing honor."

Yet, she fondly shares that in the beginning, teaming with busy high school students presented its own set of

challenges. "Do you know I had to get a new phone that I could text with....then I had to learn how to text?" she laughs. "I even had to figure out how to get on Twitter and Facebook."

She says the kids came up with their own unique rules for team meetings. "At the beginning, we established 'agreements,' our version of Roberts Rules [of Engagement].

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2008 ACCOMPLISHMENTS (PARTIAL):

- Hosted 1st Community Easter Egg Hunt & BBQ at a local housing development; 100 youth participated.
- Conducted a book drive and donated books to local shelters and affordable housing complexes.
- Conducted a work day at Agee Animal Shelter.
- Conducted a Toiletries Drive at Oak Meadow School in May, with 2,000 items collected.
- Stocked food at the El Dorado County Food Bank.
- Assisted with a Summer Youth Program.
- Handed out 400 lunches to homeless in Sacramento.
- Purchased a water buffalo and chicks for the Heifer Project.
- Conducted Warm & Fuzzy Drive for warm clothes and blankets through area schools. Made 40 blankets for homeless.
- Collected gently used toys for Powerhouse Ministry kids.
- Distributed warm clothes and blankets at the Upper Room in Placerville.
- Implemented first Project Birthday! Party.
- Assisted with the Saturday outreach at Green Valley Community Church, helping serve breakfast, load groceries in cars, and bag and load clothing for clients.
- Made centerpieces for Power House Ministries Thanksgiving dinner and distributed warm clothes, blankets and stuffed animals at this event.
- Sponsored a family in need for the holidays.
- Collected and wrapped toys for the Powerhouse kids.
- Purchased pillows and made pillow cases for poverty-stricken youth in Folsom.

2009 ACCOMPLISHMENTS (PARTIAL):

- Made and distributed 1,500 meals to the homeless.
- Collected and distributed 2,000 pounds of toiletries.
- Collected and distributed 2,500 articles of clothing & blankets.
- Collected 5,000 pounds of food and raised \$12,500 for local food banks and outreach.
- Developed public school programs for local outreach.
- Developed youth peer mentoring program and pen pal program.
- Partnered with the youth of WIND (homeless and foster youth) on 10 outreach programs.
- Assisted Green Valley Community Church, an El Dorado County Food Bank outlet, with serving meals and distributing food to 150 to 300 individuals on 24 separate occasions.
- Planned and hosted 12 monthly group birthday parties for children at a local affordable housing complex.
- Provided beds and bedding to families in need through Powerhouse Ministries.
- Collected 1,800 items and 220 letters for care packages to be sent to soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- Made 30 fleece, no-sew blankets to be distributed to those in need.



2010 ACCOMPLISHMENTS (THROUGH MARCH 30TH):

- Served 750 meals to the homeless.
- Purchased healthy emergency snacks for the local public elementary schools.
- Purchased five emergency housing vouchers for homeless families/individuals to keep everyone on track.
- Purchased \$250 worth of socks, underwear, diapers, bottles, nipples, etc. for emergency bags for CPS and foster care agencies.
- Conducted Soldier Care Package drive.
- Hosted three Project Birthday! Parties.



Hands4Hope member Alexander Allen hands out a wish list to grocery store customers outlining items needed at local food banks.

For instance, there's no texting during meetings, and participation in meetings is required – they can't just sit there."

Expanding the Circle of Influence

As she looks to the future, Bassett hopes to see Hands4Hope's volunteer base and involvement spread out from El Dorado Hills into schools in Folsom and Cameron Park, further expanding the group's outreach potential to the entire region.

It's not just the communities that will benefit, notes Bassett. "Our youth are not only celebrating amazing personal accomplishments, but they are developing life skills that will help them be better, more well-rounded individuals who care about others and their community the rest of their lives." 📌