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Costa Mesa Nonprofit Enlists Volunteers, Board to Feed Poor

By SHERRI CRUZ

In the early 1980s, Samuel Boyce, a former New York ad man, gathered six friends in his Newport Beach kitchen to make sack lunches for the homeless.

Inspired by that one act of kindness, Boyce and five others started Street People in Need in 1987 as a grassroots group to help the homeless.

Now, 30 years later, the group has evolved into a Costa Mesa nonprofit called Serving People in Need, which targets a larger group of the area's poor.

"Sam was a passionate man," said Jean Wegener, executive director of the group, which goes by Spin. "We changed the name because the clients weren't just street people anymore."

Boyce, a religious man, died in 1994. Spin still carries out his mission by delivering food, blankets, clothes and hygiene kits to Orange County's homeless.

More often these days, Spin is helping families and individuals on the brink of homelessness because of a job loss or a few bad life decisions.

Among its services, the nonprofit helps families with housing, childcare, car repair, retraining, credit repair, tutoring, job search and substance abuse counseling.

The group does more than just change the lives of the homeless.

Thomas Giddings, board member and chief financial officer for Irvine wealth management company First Foundation Advisors LLC, said he had an eye-opening experience when he rode in the food van delivering goods to people on the street.

"We've all been living in a bubble for a while," Giddings said.

The best estimate of homelessness in OC is about 35,000 people, or about 1% of the county's population.

"We've all been living in a bubble for a while."

—Thomas Giddings,
First Foundation Advisors



The estimate likely underestimates the problem here, Wegener said.

There are a number of people who are being kept in their homes with the help of friends and family, she said.

"It's not getting any better. It's getting worse," Wegener said.

A lot is required of the clients who agree to participate in Spin's programs, which can be as long as two years.

"The programs are tough love, very regimented," said Dick Crawford, board member and owner of custom homebuilder Richard F. Crawford Co. in Costa Mesa.

But results are tangible, Crawford said. Spin documents the progress of a client, so a direct link can be made between the programs and those it helps to land on their feet.

"The results are what motivate me to be involved," Crawford said.

Crawford, who was a good friend to Boyce, decided a while ago it was time for him to start giving back.

"I'm a Catholic," he said. "I've sat in mass since my childhood. They're always talking about helping the poor. I wanted to put in time and donations."



Volunteers making sack lunches: nonprofit relies on 450 volunteers

Spin has a yearly budget of about \$1.2 million, down from \$1.6 million in 2008. The drop in funding is partially because a few federal government grants have taken longer than expected to come in, Wegener said. The group doesn't target state funds.

It has a staff of nine, including five caseworkers, and a board of volunteers from the business community.

The nonprofit leans heavily on volunteers to help serve the clients and defray personnel costs. Spin has about 450 volunteers who put in about 12,000 hours annually.

Spin saves on food preparation costs, thanks to the kitchen of Boyce's former place of worship, Newport Beach's Our Lady Queen of Angels church. The food prep

and delivery team has about six volunteers who get occasional help from a Brownie troop or some other local group.

"It's all volunteer run," Wegener said. "They shop, prepare, drive the van—(even) the van is donated. It's an incredible program."

Much of Spin's efficiency is attributed to Wegener, who is pragmatic and a stickler for details. About 88 cents of every dollar has been going to the needy, she said.

This year it will be 92 cents—she recently eliminated a grant writing position, taking back those duties.

Wegener's right hand person is Mary Lou Shattuck, who's been chairing the board for about a year.

Wegener and Shattuck complement each other, said Francis D. "Doug" Tuggle, board member, Chapman professor and one-time business dean at Chapman University in Orange.

Board member Bob Mayer of Newport Beach-based Robert Mayer Corp., owner of the Hilton Waterfront and the Hyatt Regency Resort & Spa, both in Huntington Beach, brought Shattuck to the board nearly four years ago.

Shattuck, a former elementary school teacher who has a home-based stained glass business, is an established community volunteer in Huntington Beach.

The Huntington Beach Chamber of Commerce honored her last year as "outstanding citizen of the year" for her volunteer work at youth shelters.

Board members do more than just advise.

Charlie Granville, board member and chief executive of the Irvine-based marketing company Capita Technologies Inc., recently rebuilt Spin's Web site, which now accepts donations online.

"That was huge. That has really paid off for us," Wegener said.

Capita put Spin on Facebook and Twitter; music by Jayson Rowley, a local musician who wrote a song about life on the street, is featured on the site.

For Granville, doing work for Spin was an eye opener.

"My whole life as an entrepreneur was to make more revenue, make more profits," Granville said. "The thing I didn't understand was how many normal folks just don't earn enough to survive in OC." ■