

PRI VILEGE

Celebrating Philanthropy

May 2005

By Mary Lissone



Judy Cousin, Cynthia Alexander, Jacqueline Caster and Dr. Astrid Heger open the Violence Intervention Center's renovated building in Citrus Heights

How To Make Dreams Come True

START WITH LOVE OF CHILDREN, ADD A COUPLE OF HUNDRED WOMEN AND WATCH A MULTI-MILLION DOLLAR FOUNDATION APPEAR

Bathrooms are a great place to think. But probably few wet innovators hop out, dress hastily and run barefoot to a neighbor's house to share the inspiration. That is how Jacqueline Caster started the Everychild Foundation, a plan to help the neediest children and teens.

An attorney and a specialist in land use and large scale urban development, Caster attributes her care for others to her philanthropic Kansas family and her role as the mother of two.

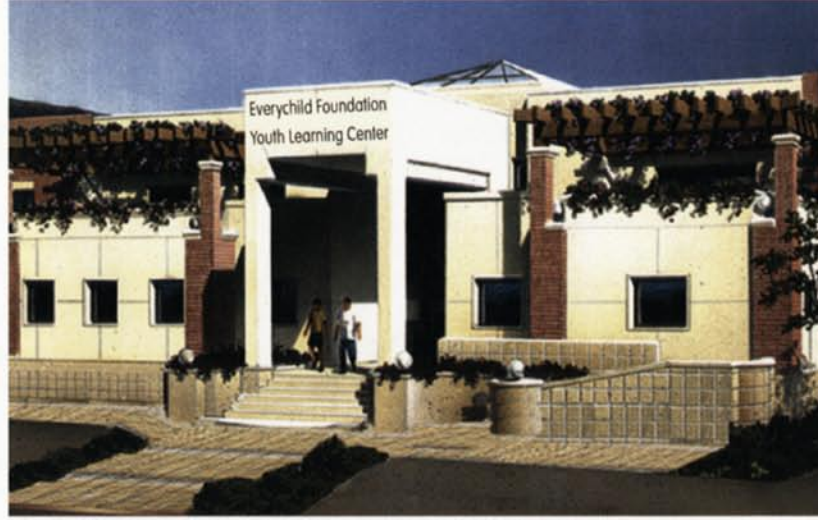
"I was juggling a career and kids and was on many boards planning charity events, attending meetings and galas, but still I didn't feel I had given enough back," she says. "I kept wondering what did the money do?"

"What if," she said to neighbors Cynthia Alexander and Debra Colbert, "we got a couple of hundred women together and each gave \$5,000 a year. We could have a million dollars. We could make a lot of dreams come true."

In just two coffee klatch meetings the women hosted at their homes they raised \$80,000 and were launched. The mission is to ease suffering of local children whether due to disease, abuse, or poverty.



Members of Everychild Foundation at the Violence Intervention Center



Optimist Youth Homes' New Youth Learning Center in Eagle Rock

In order to have maximum impact, the group gives just one large grant each year. The money must enable a charity to start a new project. A grant team made up of Everychild members screens candidates and narrows the eligible projects down to two. Then all of the members vote.

Since the first grant in 2001, Everychild has given grants totaling just over \$2.5 million to projects ranging from a mobile dental clinic to apartments for emancipated foster youth. Its impact has multiplied. Often, members decide they'd like to give an extra donation or volunteer time to the grant recipient or another charity they learned about through the selection process. Sometimes other foundations, impressed by Everychild's screening process, have stepped in with additional funds.

Operated out of Caster's Pacific Palisades home, the group has little overhead. The women did hire a grant consultant. "As we learn to do more, we use our grant consultant less," says Caster. "And we decided to place a cap on membership, otherwise we would need staff and run the risk of becoming political. As it is now, our members are free to be as involved as they like. No one is going to get a better seat at the gala because they participated more. There is no gala."

"The thing about Everychild is that our program can be replicated at any price point – 20 Boy Scouts each giving \$20 toward some cause is worthwhile," Caster says. "But we've also inspired larger efforts. The Mattel Children's Hospital adopted our model for its Today and Tomorrow Children's Fund, forming a committee of women who contribute \$5,000 a year toward a critical need at the hospital."

At a gathering at her home, Caster, Everychild treasurer Denise McCain-Thamstrom and member Amy Sommer discussed how an organization barely five years old and with 185 members has managed to cast a net far wider than even they anticipated.

Aside from love, what are some of the most important things anyone can do or provide for a child?

Amy: It's hard to establish universals. Something I may think is loving, others may find an invasion. There are boundaries of different cultures. Our mission is to give people the tools to troubleshoot, like the QueensCare Mobile Dental Program. There's nothing glamorous about it, but it meets a very simple need. If your teeth aren't aching, then you can actually listen to what the teacher is saying and learn something.

Jacqueline: The mission is very specific, to ease the pain and suffering of local children. We're not trying to provide a message about how we think you should raise your kid. For example, I think stability is really important and there are probably a lot of things people can agree on, but our main goal is to stop suffering if we can. So that's why we try to find the most critical needs, and those are pretty easy to agree on.

Denise: All the agencies we look at have different focuses and needs, but what they have in common is that they try to provide an opportunity for a child and ease a particular need or

"No one is going to get a better seat at the gala because they participated more. There is no gala."

suffering and put the child on a more level playing field with other children. That's what we all want for our children, an opportunity to find a way to live their life to the fullest in their unique and special way.

You have a very effective vetting process in choosing your annual recipient. How do you reach a consensus?

Denise: We have criteria for evaluating the agencies and we try to ask ourselves along the way deeper and deeper questions. Do they still meet the criteria? At some point they may not

**In its first five years,
Everychild has given a major gift
to each of these causes:**

2005

\$715,000 to HillSides, a Pasadena-based residential and community treatment center for troubled children. The money will be used to purchase an apartment building with 25% of the units set aside for Youth Moving On, a project to provide transitional living, support services and life skills training for foster youth, who upon emancipation at age 18 lose eligibility for government assistance. The remaining 75% of the units will be rented to the community at fair market value and the receipts used to service the purchase loan and the down-payment for a second such building purchase. This project is the first of its kind in Los Angeles County.

2004

\$630,000 to Optimist Youth Homes to build the Everychild Foundation Youth Learning Center in Eagle Rock. The new center increases services to deeply troubled teenagers in a specialized high school that combines intensive education with therapy. The grant to fund a new, larger high school building allows the agency to increase the number of students served from 400 to 550. Optimist has demonstrated that it transforms the lives of teenagers who have failed in every other placement, including many referred by the juvenile justice system.

2003

\$600,000 to the Violence Intervention Program, an agency that has become a national and international model for assessing and treating children impacted by violence. The grant renovated a 70-year-old building and has enabled the agency to help 1,100 children each year, about 45% more annually than in past years. Due to the increased physical capacity of the renovated facilities, Violence Intervention is launching a new program funded by a \$1 million grant from First 5 LA to perform 600 new emergency foster care assessments per year.

2002

\$385,000 to Wonder of Reading to build 15 libraries in low-income Los Angeles Unified School District elementary schools lacking adequate library facilities. The grant also funded the purchase of all the books for each library and the training of volunteer reading tutors.

2001

\$230,000 to QueensCare, a nonprofit healthcare provider, to purchase a 48-foot trailer and its complete outfitting as a state-of-the-art dental clinic to serve second and third graders in the L.A. district's lowest income schools. The vehicle has three fully equipped dental stations, a laboratory and x-ray equipment and is staffed by the USC School of Dentistry. Since its opening in May 2001, the clinic has conducted more than 46,000 procedures and given oral hygiene and nutrition instruction to 8,000 students and their parents.

EveryChild Foundation: (310) 573-2153; www.everychildfoundation.org



Jacqueline Caster, Sil Orlando and HillSides executive director John Hitchcock

meet the criteria. We never discuss our personal thoughts as a committee even though individuals may think "Oh I'd love to see this project or that project." As a committee, we never go into a year looking for "X" type of project – it's always what is the best agency with the best project, not does it meet our project goal or an individual interest.

Jacqueline: Both [finalists] are clearly worthy of our grant, so I think in some cases a specific project will speak to us personally, but it's such a mixture of feelings and thought process that go into it. What's interesting is that people start e-mailing back and forth and mulling it over in groups. It's really not a formal process..

Denise: The finalists make separate presentations. After they leave, Jackie always invites us to discuss the presentations and during that discussion you will hear more emotional responses, but the ballots go out afterwards when everyone is at home. We allow at least 14 days to make sure we receive all the ballots. We open the ballots and we sit in the committee with our grant consultant. The ballots are divided and we tally the votes. We double count all the envelopes. We are scrupulous.

How do people find out they can apply for a grant?

Jacqueline: You have to be invited to make an application, only because we don't have a paid staff. We realize that if we were allowing unsolicited applications, we wouldn't be able to handle them all. So they come through somebody in our organization, or another organization will recommend someone. As it is, we get 60 or more applications and we really couldn't handle more than that. The groups have to have a track record and they can't be too big or too small. They must be able to handle the grant we are offering. For example, if the largest grant they ever handled was \$20,000, they're not a good fit for us.

Denise: Or if their annual budget is \$80,000, they can't ask us for a million because they don't have the infrastructure. We also don't want a group whose annual budget is so astronomical that it really doesn't need us – like if it has a slush fund larger than our grant.

You want "tangible results" for "dream projects." Tangible and dream are seeming opposites.

Amy: I don't think they are mutually exclusive. We all have a dream that this is a meritocracy and there are goodies to be had if you really work hard. But you have to give people the building blocks to do it, whether that's an apartment to go to when the foster care system has said you're not our concern anymore, or whether it's a toothbrush.

Jacqueline: Organizations will come back to us and say we were able to add 150 more kids to our program because of your grant and that's 150 more dreams that can be fulfilled – so it is tangible.



Maria Bell and Tawny Sanders at Everychild luncheon

“There’s nothing glamorous about [a dental clinic], but it meets a very simple need. If your teeth aren’t aching, you can actually listen to what the teacher is saying.”

Denise: We know when we give our check to Everychild that the agencies are really going to do what they said they would do. My personal \$5,000 can’t do as much as the \$715,000 we just gave to Hillside.

Jacqueline: That’s why we have a professional grant consultant and we have a monitoring committee. We want to have the knowledge that we are making a difference.

Denise: One thing that we have found is that our process gets people on their toes. We only make one grant a year. We can’t afford to make mistakes. The agencies that do receive the grant sign a contract that’s fairly detailed. It requires them to follow through.

As you deal with children’s causes, are your children involved?

Jacqueline: Once a year we have Family Day barbecue at one of the member’s homes and the kids will do something to support a project. One year they spent the whole day packing 650 backpacks with school supplies. A lot of our kids come with us to our events like the library opening and they are astounded. At the library opening, the school was built for 400 kids but there are 2,500. They’ll say “wow this is really crowded.” It’s an eye opener.

Denise: I think it’s important for my children – particularly growing up on the Westside of L.A. – to be exposed by us, or they will get a false view of life and will never really understand how much a person is needed, not just for whether you write large checks. It’s your time that counts. Whether that’s going to our Family Day to fill backpacks or whether you volunteer at Head Start, the most important thing to teach them is that you want the time to follow the money.

What are some things you haven’t gotten to yet?

Jacqueline: We haven’t done anything in the area of children’s disabilities yet.

Denise: But then we are so new we haven’t had a lot of opportunity to do as many things.

But it feels as if you are so established.

Amy: I’m really very honored and lucky to be part of a group of women who are so willing to share their professional skills and devote them to Everychild, where they can educate the rest of us. I think that’s what makes Everychild seem so established after such a short time. So while there are areas we haven’t touched on, like disabilities or homeless children, it’s about finding that good fit and keeping that efficient model – and eventually all good things will come to the grant desk.

Jacqueline: We have so many talented women, women with impressive intellects and heart. What I hope is that we grow old together doing this – a diverse group bonded by one thing. We all love children. ■

Mary Lissone is a Los Angeles writer who has written a variety of articles for local and national publications.