

AZ Giving: Arizona Helping Hands

Written by Lauren A Grifol

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With May being National Foster Care Awareness Month, we decided to dive into the ins and outs of the Arizona powerhouse known for its unbelievable aid and support to foster children and their *new* families, [Arizona Helping Hands](#) (AHH). AHH has been a growing force in the Valley since 1998 when Paul and Kathy Donaldson used their pledge “Do One Good Deed a Day and Don’t Take Credit for it” to create the organization. The Donaldsons have used their determination to help one child, one dream, one family at a time and since then it has grown exponentially.

Today, under the motivating power of Dan Shufelt, AHH has propelled to new company records in the amount of children and families they have helped. With new and innovative programs and supportive institutions, Shufelt and his team have created a system to aid the children of foster care in finding a new sense of bliss and happiness they have unfortunately never had the chance to experience.

Read on as Shufelt gives the rundown of AHH while letting us in on how anyone can become involved.



AFM: What are the biggest obstacles AHH faces every year?

DS: AHH is the largest provider of basic needs to kids in foster care in the state. There are 15,000 children in foster care today, and we need resources, financially, but also “stuff” to continue to provide goods and services at the level that we do. Last year we provided 3,000 beds and cribs, 2,000 birthday packages, holiday toys in the tens of thousands, and 6,500 back-to-school supply packages. The numbers are huge, and to keep our engine running, we need both financial resources as well as donations of goods, not to mention volunteers to keep things moving along.

AFM: What does a typical birthday package include?

DS: The Birthday Dreams Program is the coolest program ever. We receive applications from foster parents and also from Department of Child Safety Caseworkers that describe children who have upcoming birthdays. We receive requests saying that little Susie is turning 6 and she likes Barbies, or Johnny is turning 4 and he likes trains. Our volunteers will take that request and “shop” among the donated goods we have in our warehouse. They look for a few items that fit that particular child’s request, and it is always amazing that despite the fact that our bins may not be overflowing with toys, there always is the perfect toy to fill that child’s request. After the volunteers take out items for that child, they add in an age-appropriate book to encourage learning. These items are gift wrapped and placed inside a gift bag that has been decorated and shares a personal message. For example, if this gift was for little Johnny who likes trains then the drawing would be of a little train with maybe the words “Choo Choo Happy Birthday Johnny.” It is a very direct statement to the child that someone has taken the time to let Johnny know that he is special and that his birthday is worthy of celebration despite his personal circumstances. We want these kids to know that they are loved and cared for by our community.

AFM: Are birthday packages for all ages, or just young children?

DS: We have been celebrating teens with this program for the past year and have already let 400 teens know their day is special. Teenager’s packages are placed into a duffel bag, which is both utilitarian and can be used for an extended period of time. Our teenage birthday packages include \$50 worth of gift cards from such vendors such as Walmart, Target, Ulta and Dicks Sporting Goods. Every teenager also receives a book. We were concerned that the message might be misinterpreted and come across as ‘here’s a duffel bag to replace that black trash bag you lug your stuff around in from group home to group home.’ Our hope was to open up those kids’ minds, thoughts and awareness. We use books similar to The Ultimate Book of Travel. Our message is that this bag can take you places - your whole life is in front of you, don’t ever sell

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yourself short.



AFM: Tell us about the "basic needs" AHH provides. and tell us about some of the "extras" you provide to kids in foster care.

DS: Our primary focus is beds and cribs, giving kids a safe place to sleep. We provide a twin bed package that consists of a box spring, mattress, set of bed rails, protective mattress cover, sheets, pillow and blanket. We provide new cribs to youngsters in foster care—640 in 2017 alone. A large majority of the cribs go to infants who were born with substance abuse issues and have just been released from the NICU. We are usually the first stop on a foster family's journey, and also provide clothing, diapers and personal care items. With the help of funding from the T.W. Lewis Foundation, we started a program providing home safety items every foster home is required to have. These items include fire extinguishers, smoke alarms, a very specific first aid kit and more. This program removes the financial strain from someone who says they are willing to help as a foster home. In the first year of this program, we provided items to over 1,000 families.

AFM: Tell us about some of the biggest triumphs or successes for the organization in the last year.

DS: My role as the executive of the organization is to friend and fund the organization. We seek out new friends who will connect with our mission and help us find the resources to expand our work. We use social media, along with print and television to increase awareness of our work throughout the community. A recent triumph - last fall we were involved in a social media contest sponsored by the Starbucks Foundation. They ran a campaign in which the top 20 organizations that drew social media attention to their cause would be awarded a \$25,000 grant. We finished in the top 10, and received a \$25,000 grant last November. We are excited about the fact that our grassroots effort of people just clicking on, viewing and liking these homemade videos resulted in this prestigious award and recognition. We have also established really great partnerships with corporations and continue to push the concept of businesses developing a philosophy of philanthropy throughout their ranks.

AFM: What has been your biggest success with business involvement so far?

DS: Our largest success in that area is with our new partnership with Living Spaces stores. Living Spaces has now done three separate buy-one-give-one programs drives in their stores; where customers coming in and purchasing qualifying mattresses know that Living Spaces will turn around and donate a mattress to give a foster child a safe place to sleep through AHH. They have held three campaigns over the last 12 months and have generated a donation of 1,000 twin bed sets!



AFM: What about other foundations around the country? Have you done any collaborations?

DS: The T.W. Lewis Foundation has issued two challenge grants to AHH, committing to match \$2,000 from any new donors of \$2,000 or more. These donations can be used to purchase materials (beds, cribs, other services) or to support our capital campaign. A combined commitment of \$40,000. This is an innovative approach - they don't want to write a check and go away, they want to push our organization and encourage us to reach out beyond our present funding sources to find new supporters and offer them this new opportunity to double their impact. We were also just awarded a grant from the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust, one of the largest trusts in Arizona. To receive this grant is an honor to our Organization. The grant funds (\$188,000 over three years) will be used for an entire revamp of our technology platforms. We are not a little charity with four desks and a phone. We have stuff coming in and out the back door, purchased products and many other layers of complex business activity. The Piper grant will help us raise the bar to operate more efficiently and effectively.

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AFM: What other communities is AHH trying to reach out to?

DS: There are so many Native American tribes in Arizona and many of those do not have the resources to be able to support their needy households. There is a lot of need out in the Native American communities that we would like to make an impact in and we would like to expand our outreach to make a difference for kids in foster care on the reservations.

AFM: Do you have any ideas on what specific technology you will be revamping?

DS: The primary piece of the technology is the warehousing activities. There are multiple components to this. The first one is the automation of the appointment process and paperwork. This will make it much easier for foster parents to fill out the application online rather than sitting in our office with pen and paper while the kids are running around. All of our client servicing will be more efficient. On the back end, it will give us much better information on tracking our purchases and reorder points to make sure that we are properly accounting for donated goods that come in the back door. At the end of the day, we are going to have an updated automated system that is at the forefront of technology.



AFM: How can small businesses and individuals help?

DS: There are many ways people can pitch in. In the state of Arizona, there are tax credits specifically to support charities that work with kids in foster care. The state of Arizona allows for a dollar for dollar tax credit against your Arizona State Tax Liability. A single taxpayer can donate \$500 a year to AHH which counts as a \$500 state tax payment, to do so costs the taxpayer nothing. A married couple is \$1,000 per year. You know where the money is going – to help children in foster care who have been victims of abuse and neglect. It's kind of a no-brainer way to help out. It is literally a repositioning of your money. From an individual point of view, we also accept donations of new items for kids as well as gently used kids clothing. We are partners with Mattress Firm stores, and any donated items can be dropped off at any local Mattress Firm store.

AFM: Are there any programs coming up for individuals to participate in?

DS: Although school isn't out yet this year, we are starting to gear up for the next school year. In the summer of 2017, in collaboration with three other charities, we provided 6,500 backpacks filled with school supplies to get the children ready to go back to school. We have already set up a donation page where donors can buy a backpack that is already filled with school supplies for just \$25. This backpack will then be given to a child so they are already set up to start the new year. We also seek out businesses and civic groups to do collection drives for us. We have boxes that put out in businesses to collect school supplies to fill those backpacks for us. We also do targeted drives throughout the year for diapers, birthday gifts, gift cards and holiday toys.

AFM: What are some of your favorite stories of the civilian generosity you have experienced?

DS: Recently, we had a couple of ladies who just turned 40 who decided that instead of their friends bringing gifts for them, they should donate something to AHH. They brought us a pick-up truck filled with toys, games and clothing. They told us this was their birthday-gift-back. We have also had a couple youngsters (encouraged by their parents) do the same thing. We had an 8-year-old boy come by a couple weeks ago who told us that for his 8th birthday party he asked his friends to give him something to help AHH. There are endless opportunities and creative ways to help AHH. My favorite tagline is that everyone can do something.

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AFM: What drives and inspires you?

DS: I find my passion in the foster parents that we interact with. We meet amazing individuals who have changed their lives to help children in need, and I am inspired by them. One of my primary drivers is that I am a grandparent. I have two grandkids, and I love my grandkids to death. They are such a joy, and grandparenting is such a fantastic role. Too many grandparents are forced into a new role – that of raising their grandkids. The other day I met a great-grandmother who is now raising her great-grandchildren. Her life has been transformed out of necessity, and like in most cases, it is because of stupid adults doing stupid things. When they get the phone call from the Department of Child Safety, saying we have your grandchild/children or great-grandchildren who are in need their whole life changes. They are often living on social security and trying to make ends meet, and have to make the huge transition to being a 24/7 parent again. They are playing a very different role than they imagined at that stage of their lives. In Arizona, these families make up almost half of the kids in foster care; and these families receive almost no governmental support for those kids. Our being able to provide for these children a bed and a little spot of sanctuary and safety is my driving force. I have had a very large number of grandparents crying on my shoulders about the fact that I just gave them two beds and a crib to help out with their family needs, we are just trying to lend our helping hands to those who are taking on such an extraordinary burden, and trying to make their lives a little bit easier.

AFM: Do you have anything else you would like to share about recent successes?

DS: I have a huge announcement to make about our recent successes, and *AZ Foothills* is one of the first outlets to hear! At the end of this month, we are going to be closing on a new building for AHH. We are going to be expanding our footprint. Right now, we are leasing a 8,000-sq.-ft. facility, and we will be moving into an 18,000-sq.-ft facility in Phoenix! With this acquisition we will be able to expand our services to even more communities around the state, to help even more children and to continue to collaborate and partner with other charities to make our impact as deep as it can be. This will open up many new opportunities for us. Part of the challenge will be to connect with generous donors who might associate with our mission and feel like this we perform an important and needed service in our community. We will be seeking public support for the acquisition and renovation of this facility. In moving forward, watch for our capital campaign to make this all a reality, and please consider all the ways you can lend us a Helping Hand!