

Diaper drive no joke now: Charitable act exemplifies impact small firm can have

By Tiffany Kjos

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Business owners Hildy Gottlieb and Dimitri Petropolis received an unexpected reaction when they sought help publicizing their diaper drive in 1994.

"That very first year we actually got radio stations that took time out of their busy day to call us and laugh at us. They said, 'This is the stupidest thing I ever heard of,'" Gottlieb said.

One disc jockey, however, was concerned, not amused. Bobby Rich, program director and morning show personality at KMXZ (94.9-FM) took up the cause, and the station's publicity has helped Gottlieb and Petropolis turn the drive into a year-round endeavor that brings in a million donated diapers annually.

Gottlieb and Petropolis, who own a consulting firm called ReSolve Inc., didn't intend to start the Southern Arizona Community Diaper Bank. They just happened to hit upon an issue that was not being addressed, and once they got into it, couldn't let it go.

"Most businesses are not going to do what we did, which is in essence create the first diaper bank in the country. You don't need to go that far," Gottlieb said.

Ellen Hargis, director of the Volunteer Center of Tucson, said whether their individual efforts are small or large, businesses collectively have an enormous impact on volunteerism here.

"They do an incredible amount. I think sometimes we think of only the big companies when we think of philanthropy and giving to the community, but as we know, Tucson is a small-business town," Hargis said.

Nine out of 10 business owners contribute money to charities, compared with seven out of 10 households, according to a survey conducted by the National Foundation for Women Business Owners and the Committee of 200, a leading women's business organization.

Aside from surveys and direct contributions, it's hard to assess the total impact small business has on many philanthropic organizations because donations are often anonymous. About 100 businesses serve as drop-off sites for diapers, but countless others hold drives and leave the diapers at drop-off sites without taking credit, Gottlieb said.

Community Food Bank Executive Director Punch Woods said businesses contributed \$110,000 last year, or about 10 percent of the agency's operating costs. They also contributed about 20 percent of the food donated to the food bank, which amounts to 100,000 pounds. Those figures don't include money donated through the United Way.

Volunteers also pitch in valuable time helping sort and package food.

"Some of our volunteers work a half-day every week. We have a few volunteers who give more. They are committed to helping us," Woods said.

About 30 percent of the year's food - 250,000 pounds - comes in from the end of November through Christmas, he said.

Many small businesses encourage employees and customers to bring in contributions for established charities such as the food bank, Toys for Tots and the diaper bank. Some offer a discount or incentive for customers and employees who bring in donations.

The unifying theme among business owners is that they help causes that are important to them, whether that means helping abused women, neglected children, the hungry or animals.

"It is a personal thing, and just because you're a company doesn't make it less personal," Gottlieb said. "It's giving where your heart says to give and giving what you've got."

Larger companies, like Target and IBM, pay staff members to volunteer for the food bank for a day or half-day, Woods said.

"It's almost limitless in terms of what each individual business can do," Woods said, and the ways businesses contribute are as varied as the businesses themselves:

* The Arizona Builders Alliance cancels its December meetings each year and focuses its efforts on renovating the facilities of a local nonprofit agency. This year, more than 100 people and 40 businesses pitched in to revamp the Bethany House Women's and Children's Center at 1130 W. Miracle Mile.

* About 30 local veterinarians round up pet food in a drive co-sponsored by the Southern Arizona Veterinary Medical Association and the Community Food Bank.

* Craig Fine Arts at 6070 N. Oracle Road held a silent auction Saturday of miniature paintings, with all of the proceeds going to Those Who Care, an organization that provides housing for homeless children. Last year, 42 pieces at the auction brought in \$5,000 from the highest bidders.

"We get some real good arguments going," said owner Dave Craig, "but it all goes for a good cause."

* Little Anthony's Diner at 7010 E. Broadway will join with the Tucson Police Department's Gang Resistance Education and Training program to provide a Breakfast with Santa on Dec. 19 for between 150 and 175 students from local schools. In addition, on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays through Dec. 23, the restaurant will offer \$1 photos with Santa, with proceeds going to the Ronald McDonald House, which houses families of hospitalized children.

None of these businesses said its philanthropic work is a marketing ploy. Gottlieb and Petropolis said the diaper bank has not boosted their business one bit, but it has lifted their spirits.

"I think the most critical thing is that it's easy and it feels really, really good. Seriously. You can't be looking at it for whether or not it's good for your business," Gottlieb said.

* Contact Star Business reporter Tiffany Kjos at 434-4083 or tkjos@azstarnet.com.