

# FOCUS Provides A Chance To Help Children



by Alessandra Selgi-Harrigan

When was the last time you had a chance to make a difference in a disadvantaged child's life? In reality not too many of us do so. Members of Friends of the Children United Society (FOCUS) get a chance to make a difference with children on a regular basis.

Pat Robitaille who moved to Coronado a year ago wanted to get involved in something worthwhile. She heard about FOCUS, a not-for-profit organization, from a neighbor. She attended a meeting and found FOCUS to be a match. Robitaille, who is now first vice president of the organization, quickly found out that the best way to get connected and see the difference this group makes is to be a shopper.

Being a shopper means shopping for items and donating them directly to the organizations that need them. FOCUS serves as the financial arm for other San Diego organizations who help children, not by writing a check but by actually buying items needed like diapers, beds, or toiletries. The children's backgrounds and needs can vary and range from disadvantaged to homeless from foster to military or even disabled.

"We support organizations throughout the county that support children," said Robitaille.

One of the organizations FOCUS has financed is Urban Street Angels who help homeless kids. "We bought a van for [the founder] to bring kids for a hot meal, shower, pick up food for them...it changed his organization," said Robitaille. "It's quite shocking to see the need."

Another of the organizations FOCUS has helped is located in Hillcrest and helps women and children with AIDS. "People do better when they're clean; hygiene matters. Once a month they are invited to get hygiene products. When I went there, there was nothing on their shelves. I asked them 'what do you need immediately?' They said diapers. So I went out and got diapers," she said.

Robitaille said that with \$2,500 FOCUS had available to fund this organization, she and the other volunteers were able to buy 2,500 items at a Dollar Tree.

"Every organization [we help] has a story like this. We come in and made such a big difference," said Robitaille. Yet another example is when FOCUS provided backpacks full of school supplies for kids through an East County Police Department. "The police sergeant wanted to make sure the kids that got the backpacks, could truly not get supplies, so she waited until the first week of school," explained Robitaille.

FOCUS helped about 30 organizations in 2018 with \$89,000. Some of them include Voices for Children, Aseltine School, Junior Seau Adaptive Sports and Juvenile Court Book Club.

Robitaille's role at FOCUS is to fundraise. "I'm trying to figure out how to make more money with traditional events and what other fundraisers we can do to support more organizations," she said.

Some of the events FOCUS has held over the years are the Holiday Boutique, the Rummage Sale and a gala. This year's goal for the gala is to have 250 people attend. The gala, a Cinco de Mayo celebration on May 5, will be held in the Community Center's Nautilus Room. Robitaille is very excited about this upcoming event which will feature live music,

cocktails, gourmet dinner, silent auction and online auction. A Latin guitarist is donating his time and will play during the cocktail hour.

Although FOCUS was founded in the Coronado Cays and most members are Coronado residents there are many others who live elsewhere. Members are both women and men and come from different backgrounds with the same goal in mind. This year's president is Roger Clapp. Currently FOCUS has 165 members and their goal is to expand and reach out to more people. Robitaille hopes to grow the membership and bring in more younger adults and possibly even junior members. There are two levels of memberships: patron - a member who provides financial support; and active, a member who volunteers. Membership is \$75 a year.

"It's incredible. When you talk to people about FOCUS. I haven't met anybody who doesn't want to help," she said. Robitaille, with her background as the chief information officer at a technology company in Silicon Valley, has helped the organization make some changes. That includes the software used for bidding for the auction. Because some members don't feel comfortable with bidding online she has recruited high school students she calls "bidding buddies" to help them during the gala.

Another big change is that she has eliminated a paper membership directory to save money. Robitaille explains the directory cost \$400. "That \$400 can go to help 75 kids. Now the directory is online," she said. "Every dollar raised matters. It means one more item from the Dollar Tree...Becoming a shopper was a great way to connect for me. It educated me so much about the need of children in San Diego. We see the huge homeless population...there are little kids out there, not just teenagers. How do they get to school?"

Robitaille has many stories about how FOCUS has helped children and is enthusiastic about each one. "The first organization I shopped for ... I bought bunk beds, bedding and microwaves. This organization helps the homeless get off the street, educate them in financial management, train them in a trade, puts them in temporary housing, helps them with savings until they can move into permanent housing. It gives them tools for success," she said. Angels Fosters Network is a foster organization that helps kids reunite with their biological parents. "We provide starter kits for them. We can get a call on a moment's notice," she said. Some of the packs include items for babies like diapers.

Originally, FOCUS had an earlier connection in the 1960s with WAIF, an organization founded by Jane Russell. It became the inspiration to women in the Coronado Cays to create FOCUS in 1982 and today it is going strong and making an impact.

FOCUS meetings are held once a month. The upcoming meeting is on Feb. 21 from 6 to 8 p.m. at the Bahama Village Clubhouse in the Coronado Cays. This month's meeting features a Bake Off. Anyone interested is invited to bring a dessert or pay \$10.

The gala will be held May 5 from 5 to 10 p.m. Tickets are \$100 per person or a VIP table for \$2,400. Auction items for the gala fundraiser will be online two weeks prior and feature many exciting items including travel, sports, artwork. For more information visit [www.focus-sdkids.org](http://www.focus-sdkids.org).