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Familiar Faces: 'Shy' girl breaks out of shell to give back to community

Jennifer Bassett founded and runs Hands4Hope

By Menka Belgal, Telegraph Correspondent



Menka Belgal / The Telegraph

Jennifer Bassett works with a child at one of the Hands4Hope outreach programs in Placerville. The organization is based in El Dorado Hills.



Jennifer Bassett has gone from being a shy little girl to grow up to become the founder and executive director of Hands4Hope. She said it took just one individual to give her confidence and make a difference in her life, and she in turn, has made a difference for thousands.

What do you love most about your job?

What I love most is working with the young people in our community and at the agencies with whom we partner. When I see them in action and working together to improve the lives of others, it absolutely warms my heart.

What is the most interesting thing that's happened to you?

Hands4Hope is the most interesting thing that has happened to me. I never dreamed I'd be the founder and executive director of a non-profit I founded that would be embraced by the community in such an incredible way. I have learned so much, from creating a business plan to creating a safe environment for young people.

I've been overwhelmed by the generosity of our community. The willingness of businesses and individuals to give and do all they can to support us has blown me away. My experiences with the youth, their eagerness and dedication to serving others and their unique take on situations is extraordinary and inspires me every day. We have some absolutely amazing kids in this community.. My experiences with those we serve have opened my eyes.

The graciousness and gratefulness of each person is something I never expected. The effect our youth have on those we are serving, whether it is children or adults, creates a sense of awe in me every time I see it. They have been told by the homeless that they are little angels, and that they have given them hope to carry on. How can you not be affected by this?

What are your three favorite songs?

I enjoy music but am the absolute worst at identifying titles and artists. My husband plays this game where a song will come on the radio and he'll say "name that band" and usually, despite recognizing the song, I have no clue who the artist is. I have, however, since college, loved the Violent Femmes . . . their songs just make me smile.

I also like the Dave Mathews Band and Death Cab for Cutie. I have seen the Violent Femmes and Dave Mathews Band in concert and have all three artists on my iPod.

What is your favorite movie and why?

I have a few favorites, one of them being "Good Will Hunting." It has a great story line and I am a big Matt Damon fan. On top of that though, it teaches so many great lessons — not to judge people by what they look like or where they come from, each person has a unique story as to why they are the people they are today, priorities differ for each

person and we need to respect this, not judge based on our own priorities, and that it is OK to challenge people to reach their full potential and take advantage of the gifts God has given them.

What hobbies do you enjoy?

I enjoy reading, hiking, camping, biking (for fun), and swimming. I also love to travel and explore new places.

What about your family?

I have an amazing family. I have two boys, 14 and 11, and they are two of the most loving, caring people I know — a couple of the goofiest as well. My husband and I have been together over 20 years now and we still have loads of fun. He is my best friend and the love of my life. Without his support and encouragement, there is no way I could do what I do with Hands4Hope. Despite hectic schedules, we really try to carve out time just for our family to do things together.

What causes are you passionate about?

I am passionate about the plights of at-risk youth and the homeless. I am also passionate about making sure my children grow up to be empathetic, caring, responsible adults. Based on the tremendous growth of Hands4Hope, it appears many other parents feel the same way I do about this.

What is one thing about you people might be surprised to learn?

I was the quiet, shy kid at school. I didn't want to speak out in class, I didn't join clubs, although I didn't always go with the flow either. I spoke up for things I believed in and for people I thought were being wronged. It wasn't until college that I had an instructor tag me as a leader and recommend me for a mentoring program and scholarship. He challenged me to be more and it has had a profound effect on my life.

What are your three favorite fundraisers?

My three favorite Hands4Hope fundraisers are Change4Hope, the Food Bank Blitz, and our major fundraiser, the Hands4Hope Haunted House at Town Center. Change4Hope is a program for our youth. They bring pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters that they have collected over the past month to their team meetings and then, as a group, decide what cause they would like to support with the money they raised. These young people have purchased animals for the Heifer Project, emergency snacks for local schools, bags for children being picked up by Child Protective Services, presents for families and children at Christmas, and lots more.

We do two Food Bank Blitzes each year, one in the spring and one in the fall. About 150 volunteers come to hand out fliers at local grocery stores letting people know how they can help the hungry in our community. Individuals can choose to donate food, gift cards, or cash. The food collected is given to local food banks and agencies serving the hungry and the cash and gift cards are divided between Hands4Hope and those agencies. Our portion supports the Hands4Hope outreach programs.

The Haunted House is our major fundraiser and is just fun. It runs for three weeks at Town Center with concessions and carnival games and we do a Premier Dinner to kick off this event. It takes a lot of volunteers and a lot of work, but Halloween is such a great holiday, we have found that people are passionate about it and love to creep others out. The funds from this event help to fund our annual outreach and youth development programs.