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Laura's House Board: Real Estate Execs, Lawyers, a Survivor

NONPROFITS: Domestic abuse group board raises cash, awareness

■ By SHERRI CRUZ

Three years ago, Nanette Vodra needed help putting on an annual fundraising gala for Laura's House, a Ladera Ranch nonprofit for domestic abuse victims and their children.

Vodra reached out to Laura Khouri, senior vice president of Irvine-based apartment developer and owner Western National Group. Khouri's company owns property with the O'Neill-Moiso family's Rancho Mission Viejo LLC, where Nanette's husband, Don Vodra, is chief operating officer.

"I love to decorate and put on a party," Khouri said.

So Khouri signed on and asked for a tour of the shelter for domestic abuse victims at Laura's house.

"I wanted to know who I was volunteering for," she said. "Tears were rolling down. I was really shaken."

The tour brought back personal memories for Khouri.

"I had forgotten that I had spent three days in a shelter," she said.

Khouri had tucked away the memory of her father's physical abuse of her stepmother. At 17, Khouri wound up in a shelter.

"I left home and never went back," she said.

Khouri not only helped plan the gala but ended up telling her "survivor story" as the main speaker at the event, which raised \$375,000.

She now serves on the board of Laura's House.



Portobello Road in Lake Forest: Laura's House has run upscale thrift store since 1995

Personal Stories

Most board members don't have a personal story of abuse. But each has a story to tell about Laura's House.

Board member Chris Petit has his own PowerPoint presentation that he brings to speaking engagements, according to Laura's House Executive Director Margaret Bayston. "He's very passionate," she said. "He goes out and does a fabulous job."

The 21-member board includes an array of professionals who range in age from their 30s to 60s.

"Sage balanced with more experienced professional energy," is how Bayston describes her board.

A few years ago, Laura's House set out to recruit more professionals, said Don Vodra,

who joined the board three years ago and served as chairman for a stint.

"It's a substantially different board from when I first joined," he said.

The board used to have more retirees and friends of friends, said Wayne Pinnell, managing partner of Haskell & White LLP, an accounting and consulting firm in Irvine.

Pinnell, chair for nearly a year, first joined the board in the mid-1990s as treasurer. He served for nearly five years, took a break and then came back in 2006.

"The meetings were ridiculously long and we didn't accomplish much," he said. "Today the meetings are short and productive."

Other board members include hotel developer Daniel Sussman, cofounder of Laguna Beach-based Brendan Group Inc.; Beth Adkisson, chair of San Diego executive coaching company Vistage International; Chris Aitken, partner at Santa Ana law firm Aitken, Aitken & Cohn; Chris Pitet, partner at Newport Beach law firm Grobaty & Pitet LLP; and Fernando Laullon, senior principal at William Hezmalhalch Architects Inc.

"It's a working board," Pinnell said. "Everybody has a productive role."

Don Vodra's role is to help raise money for a new shelter, estimated to cost \$2 million to \$3 million.

He's recruited others to help build the shelter, including architect Laullon and Rick Lutzky of Costa Mesa-based real estate developer and owner Lutzky Associates Development LP.

Developers are slow now, so they agreed to help out, Don Vodra said.

Laura's House is the only board Don Vodra said he serves on.

"There are so many causes, so many good charities," he said. "I wanted to make some kind of meaningful contribution."

Board members serve on various committees, which raise money and reach out to the community.

The community engagement committee, made up of board members and staff, speak to Rotary Clubs, companies and other groups

on what constitutes abuse (emotional and physical), the prevalence of the problem in Orange County and the resources that Laura's House offers.

Volunteer speakers reach out to potential donors and volunteers as well as people who need help, Bayston said.

Laura's House also speaks to people in positions of power, such as state Sen. Lou Correa. Bayston calls it "influencing the influencers."

The idea to reach out to influential businesspeople and others came from Tustin-based WunderMarx Inc., a public relations agency that does free work for Laura's House.

Last year, Laura's House staff and volunteers did 140 speaking engagements.

Teen program director Marissa Presley does hundreds of workshops at schools and elsewhere to try to raise teens' awareness that domestic violence is not normal.

Board members also are fundraisers.

Bayston has a "give or get" policy. Board members are required to give or get someone else to give \$5,000 annually.

"The people on this board need to be networked, connected," Khouri said.

Laura's House gets most of the funding for its \$3 million yearly budget from donations. About a quarter of the budget is government funding.

Budget Cuts

The nonprofit, like others, recently had \$100,000 lopped off its revenue due to state budget cuts.

"Fortunately, we had some reserves so I did not have to lay off or cut services," Bayston said.

Laura's House could not cut services, she said, as domestic abuse tends to rise in economic slumps.

Companies and groups also raise money for Laura's House. Every year, Bloomingdale's at Fashion Island holds a spring preview fashion show to benefit Laura's House.

"They underwrite the whole thing," Bayston said.

The nonprofit also runs Portobello Road, an upscale used clothing store in Lake Forest named for

London's Portobello Road Market. Laura's House has run the store since 1995. It used to be called Laura's House of Treasures.

Bayston, who studied law in England, started at Laura's House 11 years ago representing women in court who needed restraining orders against abusers.

She came to the U.S. when her husband's company relocated him in OC. Bayston got to know retired California Supreme Court Judge Pamela Iles, who introduced Bayston to Laura's House.

Bayston has been the executive director for seven years.

"I don't envy her position at all," Khouri said.

The job is emotionally challenging, she said.

"It takes a special kind of person to see that ray of light," Khouri said. ■



Don Vodra: raising money for new shelter



Pinnell: meetings short and productive



Khouri: served as gala speaker



Bayston: studied law in England