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RFMA GIVES Wishes Granted

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RFMA GIVES GOES BEYOND A KITCHEN REMODEL TO HELP A TRANSITIONAL LIVING CENTER EXPAND ITS REACH

When the people of San Diego fall on hard times, the East County Transitional Living Center (ECTLC) in El Cajon, Calif., is there to provide services to help them get back on their feet.

ECTLC, a faith-based, nonprofit organization that strives to end chronic homelessness in San Diego County, offers 28-day emergency shelter programs and one-year discipleship programs for people who are ready to make positive life changes and, once again, become productive members of the community. Through ECTLC programs, they receive biblical studies, church services and life skill classes.

In addition, ECTLC provides meals, clothing, job skills training and job placement programs, opportunities to earn a GED, case management, and assistance in finding permanent and affordable housing.

Since 2003, ECTLC has been a lifeline for up to 400 people daily, many of whom are families, regardless of their culture, ethnicity and faith.

The organization's facilities include an old Fabulous 7 motel that was converted into the residences, which is divided between single men, single women and families, and an adjacent restaurant that was formerly a Pancake House, which now serves 25,000 meals a month and houses a sanctuary and educational center.

When RFMA Gives was looking for its 2015 recipient in San Diego and learned about ECTLC's worthy mission, met the staff and saw that they that needed help with their aging infrastructure, RFMA Gives was ready to reach out a helping hand.

Answering a Call for Help

To find this year's recipient, RFMA Gives partnered with the San Diego Food Bank. A Request for Proposals (RFP), outlining the RFMA Gives mission and the qualifications nonprofits must meet in order to be a candidate for a RFMA Gives project, was sent to the food bank's distribution list.

ECTLC was one of many deserving organizations that responded to the RFP.

"We had a kitchen that was built in the '50s and was falling apart," said Harold Brown, CEO and President of ECTLC. "I read the last RFMA Gives story about Dallas LIFE and that encouraged me to respond to the RFP because they are very similar to us."

The Co-Project Managers for this year's RFMA Gives project were Tim Corcoran, Senior Manager of Corporate Projects for Jack-in-the-Box, and Jeff Dover, CRFP, Facilities Resource Manager at RFMA. After meeting Brown and the staff and touring the facilities, Corcoran and Dover said it was clear that ECTLC was the best fit for RFMA Gives.

"Out of all the finalists, ECTLC was doing more with less," Corcoran said. "They had gaping needs that RFMA Gives could immediately fill, and they have a large piece of property and high aspirations. We had the opportunity to make what they have better and give them the resources to expand their offerings."

"ECTLC was a slam dunk for the RFMA Gives Steering Committee to approve," Dover added.

Brown and his team were thrilled to learn ECTLC had been chosen as the 2015 RFMA Gives recipient.

“When Tim and Jeff called and asked if we’d be willing to be the 2015 recipient, I said, ‘That’s an easy question—yes!’” Brown said. “We were ecstatic, praising God and jumping up and down,” added Robert Webb, Pastor and Food Service Director at ECTLC.

The next step was for Corcoran and Dover to perform a full site visit to create a wish list of projects. They also brought vendors to tour the facilities, who were all motivated to help ECTLC with its various needs, and soon it became apparent that this year’s project would go far beyond a kitchen and dining room remodel. It would also include upgrades to the residences, the lobby, the playground area, the parking lot and the landscaping.

A New Strategy

With the unprecedented number of projects to tackle, Corcoran, who is based in San Diego and was therefore the on-the-ground project manager, employed a new strategy this year. He broke up the projects and assigned a sub-project manager for each one. The sub-project managers included Jim Robinson with CGP Construction, Steve Potter with Jack-in-the-Box and Billy To with Panda Express.

“Treating them as individual projects allowed us the flexibility to pull the trigger on any one of them once the resources were in order,” Corcoran said.

“This approach was the way to go; it was a great idea,” Dover said. “It helped us project manage better and fostered better communication with the sub-project managers and the workers.”

Dover, based in Dallas, was in charge of securing the resources, and he was humbled by the eagerness and generosity of RFMA members.

“After a few phone calls or emails, there was always a generous donation of either labor, equipment or money,” he said.

Corcoran explained that their goal was to connect each need with an offering.

“We didn’t assign any task to anyone, and we didn’t ask anyone to do anything,” he said. “We said, ‘Here’s what they need; here’s what they want; and here’s what can help them be better. Can you or someone you know help us?’ Companies responded with, ‘I’ll do that’ or ‘I can’t but I can recommend someone who can.’”

Quickly, contributions poured in, and it was time to get to work.

Building Dreams

Corcoran knew that if RFMA members toured ECTLC and met the staff and the residents, they’d become emotionally involved with the cause.

As he predicted, vendors began volunteering their services during the site visits. One such vendor was Jim Robinson, CEO and President of CGP Construction, who volunteered to fix the lobby and five motel rooms that were uninhabitable.

“Five minutes after meeting Harold, I had a desire to help ECTLC,” he said. “It was almost overwhelming how compelled I felt. I wasn’t even going to go there, but my client, Starbucks, was going, and I didn’t want him exposed to my competition, so I went. When Harold mentioned the room issues and I saw the rooms, I said I would send guys the same day to fix them. I just felt like I had to jump in because I have the ability to mobilize the efforts.”

The motel rooms were severely distressed. There were no floors, walls were either missing or damaged, the doors would not latch and all the plumbing was clogged. CGP Construction gutted the bathtubs, ran cameras into the drain lines, brought in jetting and cutting equipment to fix the pipes, and renovated the rooms. They reframed walls, fixed electrical outlets and installed new tubs, toilets, granite countertops, fixtures and ceramic tiles.

These five rooms had been out of commission for a couple of years, but today they are providing a clean and safe home for people in need.

Robinson felt a similar desire to help when he saw the condition of the lobby and the offices. He wondered how people could work in such an old and poorly climate controlled place.

“Tim said to Harold, ‘What would your dream lobby look like?’ And Harold said, ‘I could use a table in that corner,’” Robinson said. “Then, I said, ‘What if we tore out this wall? It would create a more open and inviting space.’ I started blurting out everything I wanted to do to the area. And as Tim was detailing what other companies were doing to help, I turned to Tim and said, ‘I’m going to take the lobby and the office spaces.’”

Over six weeks, CGP Construction expanded the lobby, remodeled three offices and converted a small bathroom into an ADA-compliant bathroom. Additionally, Trane provided a new HVAC system, Starbucks donated some furniture and Roll-A-Shade provided new shades.

“We’re RFMA; our big thing is kitchens, so that was a wonderful surprise for these companies to create a brand-new lobby for them,” Dover said.

Robinson also will donate new computers and a wall-mounted 55-inch HDTV, which will replace an old 19-inch TV that ECTLC was using to show an educational video about the organization.

He has also agreed to join ECTLC’s Board of Directors.

“I’m grateful to have had this opportunity,” Robinson said. “It sounds bizarre, but I’m the one who has been truly blessed by this. I’ve always encouraged people to give, but it’s been more of a robotic effort: We pick a charity, send them a check and get our tax writeoff. But thanks to this RFMA Gives project, I see giving differently. Giving back comes from my heart now, rather than a tax-deduction concept, and it makes me feel great.”

RD Construction, which is not a RFMA member, was another gracious company that stepped up and volunteered to rebuild the playground area.

“Harold is a good friend so when he said he needed help with the playground area, I said I would do it,” said Bob Davidson, CEO and President of RD Construction.

Working with Corcoran, Davidson drew up design plans for the new playground area. RD Construction renovated it over a period of three weeks.

The company repaired and repainted the playground equipment and removed 4,000 square feet of asphalt, replacing it with rubberized mulch, donated by Versico Roofing, and added 2,000 square feet of stained and stamped concrete for the patio area. DarPro provided new patio tables. RD Construction also rebuilt the awning and built a 20-foot-long BBQ island with a concrete countertop that holds two new commercial-grade gas BBQ grills, donated by RFMA.

“When I drive by there and see all the kids playing and the families using the BBQ grills, having an outside dinner at the new patio tables, that’s all the thanks I need,” Davidson said.

Other projects included repairing, sealing and restriping the parking lot by Pavement Exchange, Eagle Paving and SealMaster; adding LED parking lot pole and building lights by West Coast Construction, Peak Lighting and Regency Lighting; rebuilding four doors in the sanctuary by Vortex Doors; replacing the back dock roofing by West Coast Construction, with Durolast Roofing providing the material and installation services to waterproof the area; landscaping by Adco and palm tree trimming by Pacific Coast Landscaping; replacing five water heaters by Tommy Guerra from Water Heater Man Inc.; and the addition of a new walk-in freezer— thanks to Facility Solutions, Heatcraft, JJ Herman, EA Mechanical and All Weather—for the storage of clothes to kill bed bugs.

Finishing Touches

In the old Pancake House kitchen, Webb and his team cook three meals a day, 365 days a year. The menu is based on food donations from Albertsons, Wal-Mart, the San Diego Food Bank and Feeding America.

Webb, who has a foodservice background and is passionate about cooking, was doing the best he could with what

he had. When he found out RFMA Gives was going to give him a new kitchen, he knew exactly what he wanted. He and Corcoran designed a new kitchen that would address everything on his wish list.

Red Lobster donated a commercial-grade dish machine and an NSF-compliant triple sink; Chipotle donated a steamer and stainless-steel tables; Western Pacific Distributors and DS Refrigeration, working through Panda Restaurant Group, donated a new ice machine and bin; Mobile Fixtures secured a new double-stacked oven from Blodgett; Legacy Air donated a tilt skillet; and Pei Wei donated several fryers, refer units and griddles.

Classic Installs donated their time and labor to remodel the cookline and install the new equipment. They also removed a concrete curb and a front line of broken built-in griddles and replaced them with the prep tables. They closed the pass-through window and removed 30 feet of unused stainless-steel cabinets. In addition, Ecotech replaced three makeup air units, Entouch donated new smart thermostats as well as invested in the kitchen remodel and Plumbing Master Services handled all the plumbing work and some major repairs.

“The new kitchen will allow us to add more cooking equipment for more efficient food preparation,” Webb said. “As we grow and help more people, we’ll be able to serve more food in a quicker amount of time. I’ll be able to create menus that I haven’t done in a long time and ones that I’ve never done before so this is an exciting time. I thank Jeff and Tim from the bottom of my heart for considering us and for their diligence to make us extremely happy. They have truly blessed us. God bless everyone from RFMA Gives.”

The entire facility was painted—thanks to paint donated by Benjamin Moore—by professional painters from Apex Imaging, Northstar Paint and Paint Folks, as well as the RFMA Gives volunteers.

Lastly, Commercial Food Equipment Service Association (CFESA) has donated \$10,000 for any kitchen equipment repairs that are required during the next 12 months.

“Harold told me that he’s never seen a harder working group come through ECTLC,” Dover said.

Wishes Come True

In the end, RFMA Gives granted almost everything on ECTLC’s wish list. “I’ve been with RFMA forever, but this was my first RFMA Gives,” Dover said. “I’ve never volunteered my time before, so this was very special project for me. To see what we’ve done for the people there, it just brings a tear to my eye.”

RFMA Gives have had several record-breaking years. According to Corcoran, this year’s project is on pace to break another record.

“I don’t distinguish between someone who donated \$35,000 worth of water heaters from someone who donated eight hours of their time away from their family on a Saturday,” Corcoran said. “It’s because of people who did both that this event was so successful.”

Year after year, RFMA Gives demonstrates that everyone involved benefits from helping others. It has encouraged Corcoran to continue to find ways he can help his community and has reminded him about what’s really important in life.

“We all have certain skills that can help others,” he said. “Mine is the ability to organize the efforts of others through strategic planning and good project management. This was my opportunity to use those skills. The project reminded me to be thankful for everything we have and even for the things we don’t have because most of those things, we don’t need.

“Going forward, when we have extra equipment due to store closures and upgrades, I’m going to find organizations that can use them. I challenge all RFMA members to get more aligned with your community to get to know their needs. We don’t need a RFMA Gives event to help others.”

A Future Within Reach

Brown is still in awe of the scale of the project.

“When I answered that email back in February, I had absolutely no idea what was possible,” he said. “Things we

never would have thought were possible—who could ever dream that they could be addressed all at once? It's incredible what RFMA did for us. They saved us.”

He is already seeing big impacts from RFMA Gives' efforts.

“Our electric bill has already been reduced by 40 percent due to new LED lighting and the new hot water heaters,” he said. “That gives me an extra \$4,000 a month to provide services for people who need our help. If that was the only thing RFMA did for us, it would've been enough. This saves us \$50,000 a year and now, we can expand our emergency shelter program from six months to year round.”

Brown has big plans for ECTLC, and RFMA Gives has put him one step closer to growing and expanding the organization's reach.

In the near future, he would like to build two three-story apartment buildings for families to give them more living space.

“Currently, 50 motel rooms are dedicated to families,” he said. “They are living in one room with a small bathroom, which makes it very challenging to the children and the parents, especially over a one-year period. We want to provide adequate facilities for these families so they can put into action our teachings of parenting, nutrition, housekeeping and hygiene.”

After these families move to the new buildings, Brown wants to use the rooms for a new program that targets foster children who are turning 18 years old and aging out of the foster care system. He considers this demographic to be at risk due to their history of unstable living situations.

“These are children who have mostly lived in group homes and are transferred many times during their upbringing,” he said. “Many are very troubled by rejection and negative peer pressure and have become sexually active or use drugs. The stats on their future are extremely bad. More than 50 percent of them will be arrested before the age of 20, and a majority of them will go to prison. I would like to start a program that goes into the group homes and gives these kids an alternative to the secular system and show them the love of Christ with a hope of school and employment and after completion of the program help in finding permanent residence.”

Brown is excited about ECTLC's future, and he's very thankful for the progress that is happening today.

“I don't know how we're going to say thank you to RFMA,” he said. “It just feels better to be here now—for us and for the people who enter our programs. If you're homeless and you're rotating between dilapidated motel rooms, it doesn't feel like you're making progress. But now, when they come here, the place looks brand new. The rooms are cleaner; the playground is more accessible; everything that was done has given them a boost up, and when you get a boost up, you look for other things in your life you can improve. It helps people see the light at the end of the tunnel and it makes them want to go toward it. 2014 was the greatest year the ministry has ever experienced, and that's largely due to RFMA.”

Sherleen Mahoney is a staff writer for Facilitator.