

Realtors' foundation provides support for community members in need

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SIERRA VISTA — It began in 2005, with a few local realtors and business partners coming to the aid of more than 30 needy families in the span of two years. Since then, the Real Wishes Foundation has changed the lives of hundreds of individuals and families across Cochise County.

Patti Miller started it all with a big idea and a small number of resources that would eventually grow to become one of the community's "best kept secrets," according to incoming foundation president Linda Broughton, who is stepping into Miller's shoes as the head of the organization.

"They're like clown shoes," Broughton joked. "It really is a well-run organization, but now it's about getting the word out. We have a good board behind us and a great group of volunteers."

Real Wishes Foundation is the nonprofit arm of the Southeast Arizona Association of Realtors, which was founded in 1971. The foundation traces its beginnings to 2005, when the president of the association wanted to create a public relations

committee and asked Miller, who had only recently gotten her feet wet in real estate, to chair it.

Miller didn't agree right away — until she caught the reality show "Three Wishes" on TV one night and watched Christian musician Amy Grant fulfill wishes for small-town residents across the country. She recalls sobbing through much of the show.

"I thought, we're realtors; we have contacts with plumbers, contractors, builders. There's so much stuff we could do," she said, adding that she

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was also inspired by "National Make a Difference Day," held each October. "I asked, 'Can we start granting wishes? If you say yes, I'll take this over. And if you say no, I won't.'"

The first few years, the group advertised in the newspaper to solicit letters of need from citizens, and each realty company would select wishes to grant. The early years — which grew quickly, from 12 wishes granted the first year and 22 in the second — turned into more competition between realtors than Miller had envisioned, so she revamped the process. The nonprofit foundation formed in 2008 with a board made up of

realtors and several affiliates, such as title and lending company representatives.

"The community provides all of our livelihood," Miller said. "If they weren't buying houses, we wouldn't have jobs. And we need to give back. I always feel like our place here on earth is to give back. We have a mission and it's to take care of each other — in good times and in bad."

Getting started

The foundation's first few years were truly a grassroots effort.

When a letter came in and they needed some money to fulfill a request, the realtors held yard sales, auctions and bake sales, and relied on the generosity of local businesses to donate or reduce costs on supplies and services. Today, there are more than 30 businesses that contribute to the Real Wishes mission.

Realtors rolled up their sleeves, too, and still do today. They put on their work clothes and gloves, and help paint houses and clean up unkempt yards. Real Wishes representatives are reliable help at West End cleanup events and Habitat for Humanity project sites, not to mention their contributions to coat and food drives, scouts, schools, senior citizens and dozens of other community programs.

"The board is one of the hardest working boards I've ever been



on,” Miller said. “I know that will carry on with Linda coming on board and having the continuity of the board members, because we’ve made a name for what we do.”

In recent years, the foundation’s big fundraiser is the “Dancing Like the Stars” dinner show and live auction, this year to be held July 16 at the Thunder Mountain Activity Center on Fort Huachuca.

For the last five years, that fundraiser has helped to sustain a respectable pot of money for the foundation to use in granting wishes for a long list of things that includes replacing roofs for elderly residents on fixed incomes, aiding with dental costs and medical bills, filling propane tanks, making plumbing repairs and more.

“It’s humbling,” said Miller about how successful the organization turned out. “It’s just something I ran with, and it worked. We’ve helped a lot of people, and I feel good about it.”

One of the first wishes the organization granted was for a woman who had cancer and needed chemotherapy before undergoing surgery. It was granted with the help of a fundraiser netting about \$11,000.

One of the more recent wishes granted was for a woman in St. David who

couldn’t get water to her house because of a line break. For two and a half years, she carried water into her house each day to use, because the repairs were estimated in the thousands of dollars. The foundation used its resources to track down experts to make the repair for a fraction of the estimated costs, and that resident had her water back in just a few weeks.

“We look at a wish and know we need to just give that little nudge,” Miller said. “Life throws us curveballs, and when they hit, some people lose their jobs, and who are we to judge where they are at? Sometimes you just need a little push to jumpstart your life back up. And our community — I just can’t say enough about it. It’s a community of givers.”

Responding to the fire

The foundation used to grant wishes, throughout the year, as needed, when letters came into the mailbox.

Then the Monument Fire hit in June 2011. Since Miller’s husband, Bill, is the Fry Fire Chief, her family saw the need right away and figured out how to help.

“It’s just so close to home because of who he is and what he went through, coming home at night anguishing not knowing what was going to happen the

next day,” she said.

She set up an account within the foundation for people to donate, and when the fire station was so inundated with supplies that there was no room left to walk through the building, she contacted Gary Greer and he donated space in his warehouse for storage.

“We’d get up at 5, (my husband) would do his thing, I’d do mine, but this kept me together,” Miller said. “This was when people really started realizing we were in the community. Not that they didn’t know before, but they really heard about us.”

All told, about \$130,000 in cash and \$1 million in supplies went through the organization in response to the fire. The foundation still keeps money on hand to help with issues caused by flooding and is looking into a tree replacement program for homes in that area.

Just thinking back to those months brings Miller to tears.

“We were able to give money to victims who lost their houses, and the warehouse not only became a place for them to come get supplies, but a place where they could come, hang out, and be with others,” said Miller, who shrugs off the compliment when her fellow foundation members remind her she was named the community’s Realtor of the Year in recognition for her efforts.

Looking to the future

Miller, who has lived in the community for the last 38 years, is in the midst of moving to Phoenix with her husband, who will retire this summer, so the pair can be closer to grandchildren.

“Change is good,” Miller said, pointing at Broughton. “It’s good to bring in fresh ideas, and she’s very organized.”

Broughton has been involved in volunteer work for a number of years, including time with Sierra Vista’s Habitat for Humanity most recently, and on the board for Special Olympics in Guam

several years ago. In 2000 she began working for the credit union, from which she retired in September.

“This really is a well-run organization, and Patti has a lot of contacts within the community that I will get — even if I have to use Patti’s name,” she laughed. “I’ve always been volunteering. You always go home satisfied. You feel good.”

Miller’s involvement in the community started from the very beginning of her time here. She worked as a youth minister and as a kindergarten aide while raising her children. She was a member of the Kiwanis Club for a while, and her husband is a Rotarian.

“We’ve embedded

ourselves,” she said. “We’ve tried to teach our kids that, too. They were there to help during the Monument Fire, always came for cleanup projects, helped across the border with the orphanage. It was always a great way to teach my kids you have to give back.”

Although she’s stepping down as the foundation’s president, Miller knows her ties with the organization will never be severed.

“She’s the one who started it all,” said Nancy Dwiggin, vice president of the foundation. “Without her, there would be a lot of people in this community who didn’t get help.”



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Real Wishes Foundation personnel talk about the organization Thursday in their Southern Arizona Association of Realtors headquarters in Sierra Vista. Outgoing president Patti Miller, center, is flanked by incoming president Linda Broughton, left, and vice president Nancy Dwiggin.



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Real Wishes President Patti Miller stands in the foundation's office Thursday in the Southeast Arizona Association of Realtors building. Miller will be stepping down from her position this summer.