

Lifeworks Gala Helps to Fund Projects

Story by Stacey Frank

Roneisha realized that she was living in an unsupportive foster care situation which led her to run away and become homeless. Roneisha stated that “she did not have goals. She did not think she had any potential! she did not care about anything.” After some time, she was given information about a place that helped the youth and families in many different situations and headed straight for their help. She began to work with all the resources that were available to her and began one of this organizations programs where they offered her a safe and supportive place to live while she completed her GED, learned independent living skills, and gained employment experience (Lifeworks gala program). After many years of hard work, she is now attending the Austin Community College’s nursing program. Roneisha stated that “she is a hospice worker, she speaks to professionals and policy makers about issues surrounding the foster care system, and after graduating from Austin Community College, she would like to enroll in a four-year nursing degree program.” This story is one of the very many that Lifeworks has to tell. Mitch Weynand, Chief Operating Officer, discussed with me the purpose and the programs of Lifeworks.



Lifeworks is a non-profit organization that works to assist youths and families in crisis to safety and success. Lifeworks has eight offices in Austin helping approximately 5,000 youths and families in the Austin community each year with homelessness, mental health issues, youths and families in conflict, youths in schools, and youths that are pregnant or in violent situations. As their website explains, Lifeworks's main goals are to help homeless youth achieve self-sufficiency and avoid long-term dependency on social services: provide children and youth in at-risk situations with the support, knowledge and skills necessary to reduce the occurrence of behaviors that negatively impact opportunities for life success: and strengthen families dealing with crisis, emotional distress and violence by helping them build on inherent strengths, utilize existing resources, develop emotional competencies, employ family roles effectively, and improve communication and advocacy skills.

On February 29, 2004, Lifeworks held their 10th annual Academy Awards Gala at the Renaissance Hotel. When you walked into the hotel, the first thing you saw were beautiful, velvet-like roses everywhere, a red carpet that entered into the ballroom, and a beautiful table set up where everyone enjoyed a gourmet meal. As with almost every non-profit organization, funding is always a challenge. This gala is Lifeworks' largest fundraising event of the year. People from all over Austin come to support the services that Lifeworks creates and sustains through the silent auction and live auction at this event. This year Ray Benson, a multiple Grammy award winner, attended and was the auctioneer for the very successful live auction. Many different and wonderful items were offered and bid on, such as a week in historic Scotland where you stay at a 4-bedroom private home and have the opportunity to play golf on some of the most legendary golf courses, a trip to Los Cabos for seven days, six nights in a private three- bedroom villa with the chance to play two rounds of golf on Jack Nicklaus' first signature course, a wining and dining package for 10, and a night on the town in Austin including 5 rooms at the Driskill hotel, dinner at Uchi ,and attending a new bar called Oslo. There was also a party planned for you and 30 friends, and a New England getaway where the lucky winners can enjoy a relaxing week in a three bedroom home on the coast of Long Island Sound. However, these fabulous items did not end here. There was a silent auction with items ranging from a simple haircut to a HDTV. One of the most memorable parts of the gala was when Roneisha was introduced and given the opportunity to tell her story to all of the guests. It was wonderful for those in attendance to actually meet and hear from one of the people who have become successful from the organization's services and hard work.



The money from fundraisers like this goes to support Lifeworks' ten programs that are used to support the youth and families that are in need. There are four main programs that are used for housing issues. The first program is called the Street Outreach Program which permits youth from the streets to access many different resources that Lifeworks provides, including education, GED preparation, cleaning services, medical care, and many other support services. They also have a program that is called the Emergency Shelter Program, which provides short-term living (approximately 30 days) for children that are 0-19 years old. This is the only program that provides walk-in emergency shelter. A third housing program is the Transitional Living Program, which aids kids, between the ages of 16 and 23, in preparing them for adulthood. It is a 24-hour residential service that they are able to live in for up to 18 months. The goal is to help them move into their own residence by the end of the 18-month period. The Supportive Housing Program is the last of the housing programs offered. People that use this service are living in their own apartment, doing their own cooking, working, but Lifeworks helps them for a certain amount of time by subsidizing the rent on their residence.

Youth development is another area that Lifeworks has created. These services cover all types of issues such as drug and alcohol support, education, and mental health. The first of these sorts of programs is the Next Step Program, which focuses on educating teachers with ideas that they implement into their class to help prevent alcoholism, drug abuse, and violence. Lifeworks provides teachers with ways that the children can avoid drugs, alcohol, and violence, and how to deal with these issues if put in a situation. Lifeworks also

delivers Pregnancy Prevention Services and Teen Parenting Services to the youth. The Pregnancy Prevention Service is also an in-school activity that gives children information on how to prevent becoming pregnant. This program is an abstinence-based program, but not exclusive to that (they provide information on other ways to prevent pregnancy also).idea. Teen Parenting Services are used to try and keep teens that have children to stay in school. Day care, diapers, high chairs, and any other needs that the teenager could use are given to help them achieve their education goals. Another option that is offered is the GED and Lifeskills plan,which is an alternative school for those that dropped out of school and would like to come back to work on their literacy skills and pass the GED test. Counselors also work to prepare them for when they turn 18 years old and will begin life on their own by teaching them how to look for an apartment, balance a checkbook, buy a car, grocery shop, and many other life skills. Lastly, there are After Care Transition Services--which works with clients that have already left Lifeworks other programs, but still need help with things such as paying for tuition, buying books, and much more--and also Counseling Services to the Youth--which is therapy given to those in family violence and other issues that face youth and adults.

Authors' note: After working with Lifeworks on their phenomenal fundraiser and learning about their many programs and activities, I found this organization to be absolutely fantastic and worth any time one has to offer. As with many non-profit organizations, volunteers and funding are always needed. If you have anything to put forward please contact Mitch Weynand at 512-735-2207.