

Horrible Stories Can Have Happy Endings When You Give To The United Way

Story by Toni Garrard Clay

It was just a regular day at work when Leslie Saunders received a call at the Henderson County HELP Center about a young girl from an area school who had been sent by her teacher to the nurses's office. "Her pants were so tight she could barely walk in them," said Saunders, the HELP Center's executive director.

While visiting with the school nurse, the girl bravely confided she was being abused by the man in her house. Her revelation led to Child Protective Services and law enforcement being notified. The girl and her younger brother, who was also at the school, were taken to the Henderson County Children's Advocacy Center, housed within the HELP Center in Athens, where they were compassionately interviewed in a child-friendly setting.

"That little girl told a horrific story of assault and abuse," said Saunders, "and we realized that not only was the male in the household the perpetrator, so was her mother."

The girl's mother, who had come to the HELP Center along with her 18-month-old triplets, was arrested on the spot, leaving the five children with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

"We worked with the Salvation Army, the Clothes Closet and the Rainbow Room to provide clothing and necessities for the children," said Saunders. "As time went on, the Children's Advocacy Center also provided extended counseling and court orientation."

There is a happy ending to the story. The children were adopted by their grandparents and were able to stay together.

"They're happy, and they're healthy. But without that

counseling and other support services, I don't believe they would be," said Saunders. "That little girl went from being a victim to being a victor in part because of the funds provided to us and other agencies by the United Way."

Saunders knows firsthand how important the United Way is to the well-being of an entire county. As the annual Henderson County United Way fundraising campaign continues through November, now is a wonderful time to show support to those in need by supporting the United Way.

The HC United Way supports 22 non-profit agencies in Henderson County (see sidebar for a complete list), which ranges from social service agencies to agencies catering to children and the elderly. This year's fundraising goal is \$175,000.

"If we're able to meet our goal, we can give to these agencies that help the whole Henderson County community," said Mary Waddell, executive secretary for the HC United Way. "There are so many people with needs out there."



United Way

“That little girl went from being a victim to being a victor in part because of the funds provided to us and other agencies by the United Way.”

— Leslie Saunders, HELP Center Executive Director


Ralph Fortner, president of the United Way board of directors, points out that 95 cents of every dollar given to the United Way goes to one of the 22 agencies they support and, occasionally, emergency situations.

“Every dollar counts,” said Fortner. “That’s not just a platitude. Whether you give a dollar a week or 100 dollars a week according to your conscious and your pocketbook, it helps.”

Just one dollar a week — \$52 a year — can provide a child with a hot supper and one-on-one tutoring.

“I’m a banker. My job is clean work,” said Fortner, who serves as senior vice president/branch manager of Southside Bank in Gun Barrel City. “I go home to a clean and healthy house every night. Then I got involved with the United Way, and when that happens you learn there’s another kind of life out there that some people lead. It’s their stories that compel me to serve, to get involved and stay involved.”

Waddell echoed the same sentiments.

“Some of the stories we hear from agency representatives during the allocation process make me sit and cry,” she said. “By being part of the United Way, I feel that I can help many more people in the community by helping to raise funds that support these agencies and what they do. And by giving to the United Way, you’re doing the same thing. Every dollar helps. The big donations are terrific, but it’s also the little dollars that add up.” 

Agencies Supported By the HC United Way

American Red Cross

Boy Scout Troops #342 and #11

Bully Prevention & Intervention Program

Cain Center

CASA

Cedar Creek Library

Child Advocacy Center

Delinquency Prevention Program

Disciples Clinic of Athens

East Texas Council on Alcohol & Drug Abuse

East Texas Crisis Center

Family Peace Project

Family Resource Center

Henderson County 4-H

Henderson County Teen Court

Labor of Love

Meals on Wheels

New Beginnings/After Baby Comes

Salvation Army Athens Branch

United Way Children’s Emergency Fund/Assistance for the Elderly

United Way Helpline

To give to the United Way online using PayPal, visit www.unitedwayhc.org. Donations may also be mailed to PO Box 1435, Athens, TX 75751.