

## FUNDRAISING EVENTS AND VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

With state funding already limited and further budget cuts a constant threat, AbilityFirst depends heavily on fundraising and volunteers. "Being nonprofit, we have to keep our staff very lean and keep our costs down, and we're only able to do that because of volunteers," says CEO Lori Gangemi. Thanks to the efforts of AbilityFirst's dedicated volunteer coordinators, there are many upcoming opportunities for giving.

About 500 people have signed up to "run, walk, bike or wheel for AbilityFirst" in the LA Marathon on Sunday, March 19. To sponsor the AbilityFirst marathon team or an individual runner, visit the AbilityFirst marathon donation site at [www.abilityfirst.org/donate\\_marathon.htm](http://www.abilityfirst.org/donate_marathon.htm), or call the number listed below for more information.

AbilityFirst's 21st Annual Golf Classic will take place Monday, April 3, at the Wilshire Country Club in Los Angeles. The event offers lunch, cocktails and a day on the fairway. Enter as a foursome or individual golfer. Call now to reserve your space.

Can't make it to one of the fundraising events? There are still plenty of other opportunities to get involved. AbilityFirst welcomes volunteers at almost all of its many centers, providing an opportunity to work with the clients. Volunteers can help with reading, arts and crafts, mentoring and more.

Volunteers are also needed to serve on the AbilityFirst Board and Committee to help organize and plan the many fundraising ventures put on by AbilityFirst every year.

AbilityFirst also accepts donations of cash, stock, property and other planned gifts.

*For more information or to find out about other ways to get involved, please contact Special Events Coordinator Julie Benn at (626) 396-1010, ext. 334.*

# Putting abilities first

*AbilityFirst has been looking beyond their clients' disabilities since 1926, bringing a can-do spirit to the special needs community.*

BY HILARY JONES ~ PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER RAINONE

**U**PON MEETING THE FOUR WOMEN OF THE Smith family, it is immediately apparent that they are a force to be reckoned with. Four generations strong, they are a tight-knit group mobilized in support of one of the family's youngest members, 14-year-old Shawn Marie Stinson.

Shawn, an eighth grader at Woodrow Wilson Middle School in Pasadena, is developmentally disabled. Although she has never been formally diagnosed, Shawn faces substantial adversity. She functions at the level of a 4- or 5-year-old; her communication skills are severely limited, and she requires constant care and supervision.

The Smith family turned to AbilityFirst for help with this considerable challenge. Shawn is now a participant in AbilityFirst's after-school program at the Lawrence I. Frank Center in Pasadena.

All of the Smith women are devoted to AbilityFirst: Shawn's aunt, Julie Benn, is the special events coordinator, and Shawn's mother Jacqui Stinson, grandmother Julie Smith and great-grandmother Julia Shaw work as volunteers.

"When we found AbilityFirst, we had been searching for the right place for Shawn for years."



Shawn Marie Stinson and Sarah Saewert, activity coordinator at AbilityFirst



Shawn Marie Stinson, Jacqui Stinson, Julie Benn, Julia Shaw, Julie Smith and Lori Gangemi

says Smith. "It became such a lifesaver in our family."

According to AbilityFirst CEO Lori Gangemi, this attitude is not uncommon among the families that come to its centers.

"They talk about life before AbilityFirst and life after AbilityFirst," she says.

For Benn, the reason they have all committed themselves to serving this agency is simple. "Everything that we do is geared towards our family and how we support each other," she says.

AbilityFirst was established in 1926 as the Crippled Children's Society by Lawrence L. Frank and Paul Dietrich, two Los Angeles-area Rotarians. In 1999, the society's name was changed to AbilityFirst, symbolic of the agency's mission to focus on the clients' abilities rather than their physical or developmental disabilities.

AbilityFirst is a local agency, with 23 centers spanning four Southern California counties. Despite its relatively small size, the scope of programs and activities it offers is vast. The agency has programs for every stage of its clients' lives, from after-school programs for children as young as 5 to group homes serving senior citizens with

special needs.

At the Lawrence L. Frank Center, Shawn participates in an after-school program where she learns life skills, or what Smith neatly terms "things people need to know to survive in the world." These are the really important things, such as how to count and spend money, how to get along with others and how many blocks you have to walk to get to Target.

"Programs like this give our kids the ability to be within the community. For so long they institutionalized them, and so there were no programs like this around," says Stinson. "This is our way of keeping them in our homes, in our community, without just putting them away somewhere."

In addition to the daily after-school program, children at the Lawrence L. Frank Center also have the opportunity to surf, kayak and rock climb in the summer, and put on plays, talent shows and other productions in the months when the weather is not so warm. The AbilityFirst drill team is a popular feature at the center, and one of Shawn's personal favorites.

"It gives her independence and control of some things in her life because this is her place. She

doesn't have a lot of things that are just for her, and this is just for her," says Stinson.

In addition to offering a long list of social and recreational activities, AbilityFirst also brings the talents of a devoted staff to the table.

"These are her people," says Shaw, who describes the AbilityFirst staff as an extended family.

When asked what keeps him coming back, a smile spreads across Program Supervisor Pil Mendez's face.

"The kids and the kids," he states simply, nodding toward a nearby table full of young children, many of whose faces are smeared with purple pop-sicles.

For Shawn and other children like her, having a developmental disability amounts to a lifetime of challenge and sacrifice, not only for themselves but also for their families. The scope of the sacrifice required from the families of children with special needs is often difficult to imagine; it is a financial and emotional struggle, putting a strain on a family's budget as well as their time and energy.

Regardless of how much Shawn enjoys the numerous exciting activities AbilityFirst has to offer, the agency gives her —Continued on page 38