

## On the brink of closure, local nonprofit saved

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A San Antonio nonprofit that provides housing and a day program to arguably the most vulnerable of populations — people who are legally blind, hearing impaired *and* suffer from a third disability — was itself in a vulnerable position until recently.

HandsOn, which has provided such services since 1988, was at risk of shutting its doors this year after three residents died unexpectedly, triggering a drop in state funding. Already, a slowdown in referrals for the program was putting the organization at financial risk.

Gay Bellamy, who oversees the four group homes where 23 clients live, said she didn't know what she was going to do.

"I dreaded having to call parents, telling them we were shutting down," she said. "Some of our residents have been with us for almost 30 years."

Closing the doors of HandsOn meant many residents would wind up at state hospitals or similar institutions — not appropriate settings for people with this set of disabilities, Bellamy said.

But redemption happened this summer when the Kronkosky Charitable Foundation, which has provided HandsOn with grants of varying amounts over the years to keep the doors open, came to the rescue with an ingenious solution.

On Aug. 1, HandsOn formally came under the umbrella of Mission Road Ministries, an almost 70-year-old agency that operates five nonprofits in San Antonio that currently serve nearly 800 children and adults with intellectual development disabilities, or IDD.

It's an ideal match, Bellamy said on a recent afternoon, when clients from two of her group homes took part in activities at the HandsOn day program, which has been run out of a classroom at the nonprofit Providence Place since 2004.

Nine adults sat around long tables and filled in coloring books, strung beads, played with flashcards and worked on puzzles.

It's mainly "busy work," Bellamy said, but coming under the Mission Road umbrella means soon she'll be able to expand the activities offered through the day program, in part by being able to access the Unicorn Center, Mission Road's 26,000-square-foot vocational and life skills-training facility.

The plan also calls for the improvement of the housing program — currently, HandsOn owns one home and rents three others. One new home has already been purchased by Kronkosky and will be handicap-adapted and converted to house six residents, said Toby Summers, head of Mission Road Ministries.

Coming under the Mission Road umbrella brings HandsOn a wealth of help, Summers said — administrative support, health insurance and other benefits for the staff, enhanced quality of services for the residents, grant writing and fundraising support, a fleet of new vans and additional services.

“And, over time, will have the resources available to grow the program, if there’s demand,” he said.

When he was contacted by his old friend Tullos Wells, director of the Kronkosky Foundation, and told about Bellamy’s predicament, it was obvious that HandsOn could find a home inside Mission Road Ministries.

“If ever a group deserves to be supported and provided with services, it’s this group,” Summers said. “I can’t imagine being blind and deaf *and* with an intellectual disability. We are honored and humbled to play a role in the next chapter” of HandsOn.

Wells said that in the past, people with this set of disabilities tended to end up in state institutions, “where they were fed and washed and that was about it it.”

Founded as Hilltop by Goodwill Industries in 1988, the nonprofit changed its name to HandsOn in 2004, when Goodwill decided to no longer run the program, said Bellamy, who has been involved in the nonprofit since its inception and became director in 1992.

Residents must be legally blind, have a hearing impairment that affects their speech and a third disability that affects their ability to function independently. Currently, the clients range in age from 29 to 58.

### **‘What happens once I’m gone?’**

For parents like Sally and Bill Kern of Wichita Falls, which is a seven-hour drive from San Antonio, finding HandsOn was a godsend.

Their daughter Kim, 36, was born with a chromosomal disorder and has been blind since age 13. She has lived at a number of residential programs throughout Texas, but none has fit as well as HandsOn, where she’s lived for nearly five years.

Part of the problem is that people with both blindness and hearing impairment make up a “low-incidence population,” Sally Kern said, so it’s very hard to find services specifically geared to them.

At one point, Kim was living in a residential program where the other residents had intellectual disabilities, such as autism, but none had her particular set of disabilities.

“She was losing her skills and her personality was just imploding,” Sally said. “The staff didn’t know Braille or sign language.”

When she met Bellamy after much searching, she knew right away “that this was a person I can trust my daughter’s life with.”

And like many parents who have children with significant impairments, the Kerns worry about the future for their daughter, who has no other health conditions.

“What happens to my child once I’m gone?” Sally Kern asks. Knowing that HandsOn now has the support of two nonprofit powerhouses — Mission Road and Kronkosky — means she is sleeping much better at night.

“It’s exciting to know that HandsOn is now part of something much larger,” she said.

On the recent morning at Providence Place, Kim composed an email on her iPad, which has been adapted with a Braille keyboard. Her fingers flew across the raised dots that spell out the Braille code. Sally, who was treated for breast cancer two years ago, got an email from her daughter as she was receiving her first chemotherapy treatment.

She didn’t know that staff members had trained Kim to use the special keyboard.

“I just sat there and cried, it was so wonderful,” Sally Kern recalled.

Kim is one of the “higher functioning” members of HandsOn, Bellamy said. She and the others stay very busy at their group homes, doing chores, going grocery shopping and learning other life skills. There’s horse therapy and other fun activities.

It’s all about living the fullest life possible, Bellamy said.

Wells said that Kronkosky has “committed to investing \$500,000 in HandsOn, in addition to the \$600,000 it has awarded the program in the past decade, with more than half of it given in the last 18 months.” Summers said that Mission Road’s involvement will include purchasing more housing, as well as the business supports.

“We will raise money for the other homes,” he said. “Both we and (Kronkosky) have skin in the game.”

After years of fretting and “cobbling together just enough money to make it one more year,” Bellamy said it is an immense relief to refocus her attention on working with residents.

“I get to get back to doing what I’m passionate about,” she said.

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