

The Crowd: Reaching out to abused children

March 14, 2012 | By B.W. Cook



The numbers are still coming in a week after the event.

Organizers hope to reach a grand tally of \$250,000 raised at the annual "For The Love of A Child" fashion show and luncheon, held at the Newport Beach Marriott Hotel & Spa on March 5, and chaired by the dynamic and dedicated team of **Diana Miner** and **Kristen James**.

Some 400 women and a sprinkling of gentlemen converged upon the hotel near Fashion Island for the first major spring fashion show of the season on the Orange Coast. Sponsored once again by the generous management team at South Coast Plaza, under the supervision of community relations executive

Kathryn Glassmyer Cenci, the runway production had plenty of New York style as the lines of some of the hottest designers on the planet were showcased for the admiring crowd.

This year's spring lines are feminine and fabulous, with a return to vibrant color and alluring fabric choices. On the catwalk this year were exceptionally young models, barely into their 20s, tall and thin as required showing off long locks, minimal makeup and unbelievably high, strappy overly designed platform shoes.

Standouts from the designers included fashions from DKNY, Saks Fifth Avenue, Escada, Tory Burch, Canali, Calypso St. Barth and St. John. In the crowd was the founder of St. John, **Marie St. John Gray**, honored for her incredible career revolutionizing worldwide fashion trends, a career which began in her garage. Tribute was also paid to Marie's husband, **Bob Gray**, the business force behind the St. John empire who passed away in February.

The sexiest rags on the runway came from the design house of Versace, with one evening gown in particular creating a "wow" sensation in the audience. The floor-length gown, cut extremely low in the back with fabric just above the derriere, created a major buzz.

In addition to the dedicated chairs, the Childhelp fashion show committee working to create the success was led by Orange County chapter President **Pam Pharris**. Assisting Pharris were **Nancy Cardin**, **Patti Edwards**, **Katherine Meredith**, **Gina Van Ocker**, **Shan Womack** and **Joyce Simon**. Also deserving credit: **Joy Estrada**, **Jennifer Kite**, **Dale San Filippo**, **Michele Terpstra**, **Nancy Whitlock**, **Leah Carroll**, **Debra Violette**, **Mary Allyn Dexter** and **Jacque Casey**.

The fashion show was the icing on the cake. All the glitz, the glamour and the fun attracted the crowd for a much more serious purpose.

Childhelp is an organization that raises money to care for abused and abandoned children who are at the bottom rung of the social ladder, many of whom are so damaged that they cannot be placed in routine foster care.

To put it another way, the Childhelp Village in Beaumont, and group homes established in communities all over Southern California, as well as many other sectors of the American landscape, care for children who literally have nowhere else to go.

It is a daunting task that gets more challenging with each year that our economy struggles and society faces a crisis in family values and moral standards. The stories of abuse are horrendous. In fact, in some cases, they are criminal.

The ladies of faith-based Childhelp work tirelessly year in and year out, raising money to pay for basic life essentials for the children in need.

There are struggles. Funding ebbs and flows. Costs continue to escalate.

Staff changes at the Childhelp facilities present ongoing challenges. Many of the children cared for require substantial psychological assistance, medical care as well as educational and social support. Some are so far behind in terms of their schooling that it is hard to imagine that they might ever be able to catch up to their peers' levels.

But the work goes on, one day at a time, one child at a time.

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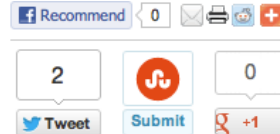
A standing ovation in the audience welcomed two women with very different backgrounds, yet both with common life experiences. **Lauri Burns** was presented to the crowd as the recipient of the annual Children's Friend Award. The beautiful young woman, dressed simply but elegantly, came onstage to share her story.

Burns endured years of physical beatings at the hand of her father from the time she was about 5. The physical and emotional abuse left her suicidal, as she entered foster care and eventually became addicted to drugs.

Soon, Burns found herself on the streets of Santa Ana working as a prostitute. Burns told the crowd that, from the depths of her situation, she discovered the foundation for her life's mission: to rescue children from a foster care system in California that is failing many of them.

She too had been a ward of the foster system, and was emancipated at 18 and left to fend for herself with nowhere to go and no money.

In 2008, she founded Teen Project. A home in Lake Forest was purchased, which has become a shelter for emancipated foster kids who are making the transition into independent adulthood. The Childhelp crowd cheered her success as Burns broke down in tears at the microphone.



A set of social media and engagement buttons. At the top left is a 'Recommend' button with a Facebook icon and a counter showing '0'. To its right are icons for email, print, and a plus sign. Below these are three buttons: '2' (with a speech bubble icon), a 'Submit' button with a red circular icon containing a white 'S', and '0' (with a speech bubble icon). At the bottom are 'Tweet' (with a Twitter icon), 'Submit' (with a blue icon), and '+1' (with a Google Plus icon).

In contrast to Burns' story, another exceptionally beautiful woman, **Catherine Oxenberg**, descendant of European royalty — her grandfather being the former H.R.H. Prince Paul of Yugoslavia — took the stage to accept Childhelp's Inspiration Award granted to her and her husband, **Casper Van Dien**, for their generous and dedicated work assisting the children cared for by the organization.

In an elegant speech, Oxenberg, who is also an accomplished Hollywood actress with credits that include the once ultra-popular television series "Dynasty," bluntly shared with her audience that she too had been abused as a child. Her candor surprised the crowd as she detailed her personal journey, ultimately sharing that her marriage and their five children today live happy, healthy and productive lives outside the circle of abuse that she experienced.

A spring luncheon celebration followed in the Marriott ballroom. A festive and upbeat raffle awarded prizes to lucky donors, including a grand prize \$2,500-shopping spree courtesy of South Coast Plaza.

THE CROWD runs Thursdays and Saturdays. B.W. Cook is editor of the Bay Window, the official publication of the Balboa Bay Club in Newport Beach.