



Enrique, 14, takes a walk outside on the campus of St. Jude's Ranch for Children in Boulder City on April 4.

LEILA NAVIDI

CHILDREN

NEVADA'S YOUTH WIN AS ST. JUDE'S BUCKS THE ODDS

CEO helps charity beat the recession and care for homeless kids

By DYLAN SCOTT

Christine Spadafor walked through the doors of St. Jude's Ranch five years ago and found a nonprofit organization on the brink of collapse. The board chairman told her that the home for homeless children, which had taken in more than 1,000 residents since 1967, had only two months of cash left. ¶ A financial consultant from Boston, Spadafor devised a business plan to turn things around. ¶ Now she's the CEO of St. Jude's, overseeing the organization's rebound through the Great Recession. The effort culminated in March with a groundbreaking of a home for homeless young adults in the Las Vegas Valley. ¶ At first, "it was dire," she said. After giving her recommendations to the board, she expected to be thanked and ushered out of the building. Instead, it came to her a few hours later and asked if she would lead the rebuilding. ¶ "I've worked with Fortune 500 companies that didn't exhibit that kind of courage," she said. "Everyone was engaged. This took everyone working together."

FOLLOW THE MONEY

Christine Spadafor's business plan for St. Jude's Ranch has made it possible for 86 cents of every dollar donated to go directly to the children at the ranch.

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RANCH TEACHING YOUTH LIVING SKILLS

Spadafor became CEO in 2006 and went to work. The problems ran deep: With a \$4.3 million budget, St. Jude's was losing more than \$1 million a year on top of \$2 million in debt. Spadafor had listed 112 actions necessary to keep the home open, instituting organizationwide operating and financial procedures.

One fact she's most proud of: Now, when somebody donates \$1 to St. Jude's, 86 cents go directly to the children. That's up from 62 cents.

During the transition, Spadafor said the focus always was on serving the children at the ranch. It's perched along U.S. 93 in Boulder City on the ascent from Lake Mead, recognizable by the simple stucco white chapel — an ode to St. Jude's Episcopalian roots — that sits at the campus's entrance.

Several ranch-style houses dot the property, each home to six youngsters and a home parent, who lives with the residents 24/7. There is a feeling of family, reflected when Jacob Wilson, 17, hugs Spadafor tightly as he leaves her office after an interview.

Wilson, who has lived at St. Jude's since he was 12, is one of 60 children who live on the ranch. His mother was a drug user, and he had shuttled among a number of children's homes before landing at St. Jude's.

At that time, he couldn't read or write. Since then, the junior at Boulder City High School started his own business — a gift-card exchange program that benefits the organization — and plans to join the Marine Corps after graduating from high school.

"I'm going to remember them for the rest of my life," Wilson said of the residents and staff at St. Jude's. "This is the one place I can call home. I'd rather live here than with my family. I wish more kids who were mistreated could come here."

Spadafor hopes to realize that goal with the group's new financial footing.

These days, St. Jude's is debt-free, its credit rating has soared and a rainy-day fund has been



LELA NAVOI

St. Jude's Ranch residents Mali and Enrique work on their homework this month. St. Jude's is embarking on a project to build an independent living center for 18- to 25-year-olds who have outgrown foster care.

established for whatever uncertainties the future might bring. The transition wasn't seamless — Spadafor said there was almost a 100 percent staff turnover — but she stressed that those who left did so voluntarily.

Its recovery becomes even more impressive when compared with the unsettling national trends for nonprofit groups. Nearly 90 percent of charities surveyed by the Nonprofit Research Collaborative saw a decrease in donations from 2008 to 2009 because of the recession. A slight improvement came last year, when 43 percent of nonprofit groups reported an increase in fundraising, but another 33 percent experienced another drop in financial support.

St. Jude's has defied that pattern by presenting a clear mission and successfully responding to the needs of its community, Spadafor said.

Judy Tudor, manager of the Clark County Family Services

Department, agreed.

"It's very exciting that they're building a young-adult-friendly facility," she said. "It's definitely needed, and it's really a partnership between the county and St. Jude's. There's now that safety net for those individuals."

Several programs have debuted in the past few years, including one that supports young and expecting mothers in Clark County. But SJR Crossings, the St. Jude's independent living program for 18- to 25-year-olds who have outgrown foster care, might be the most ambitious yet.

Ground broke March 18 for the \$3.3 million project, which will be paid for by grants from Clark County and the Housing and Urban Development Department. Spadafor credited St. Jude's renewed financial viability with securing that crucial funding.

Like all St. Jude's programs, the young adult intervention home will offer support for an underserved demographic in

Clark County, Spadafor said. Family Services estimates up to 100 youths age out of foster care in a given year. About 400 foster youth or former foster youth fall between ages 15 and 21, Tudor said.

Foster care ends at age 18 or upon high school graduation. What happens next varies wildly from case to case, but the few statistics available paint a bleak picture.

A study by a UNLV professor in 2003, in a much brighter economic climate, found that 36 percent of former foster youths said they had at least been temporarily homeless; 41 percent reported spending one night or more in jail; and 37 percent were unemployed.

Last week, the Washington-based Employment Policies Institute released an analysis giving Nevada the fifth-highest unemployment rate, 33 percent, among teens.

The goal of SJR Crossings is

to reverse that trend, one young adult at a time, Spadafor said. The home will have enough room for 15 formerly homeless youths, allowing them to live in an apartment-style setting with the oversight of an on-site manager.

"The former foster care youth don't quite fit into a shelter environment, and they often don't have anywhere else to go," Tudor said. "Now we can focus on meeting them where they're at and supporting them."

The project is designed to replicate "real life," Spadafor said. Residents will sign a lease and commit to the group's case management program, which is intended to "move clients to stability and self-sufficiency," she said.

The facility's occupants will essentially run a household, fully responsible for their everyday life — including securing and holding a full-time job or being enrolled as a full-time student, maintaining a budget and other adult responsibilities.

The goal is to have residents enrolled in an education program or employed within 90 days of moving in, Spadafor said.

The director at St. Jude's Ranch has a tangible passion for her work. Her office is speckled with the artwork of the residents, and they've taken over the white board that once outlined her plans for the rebuilding.

Before she arrived in Boulder City, Spadafor had represented two Hollywood movie studios and a French perfume company, traveling the world and reaping six-figure salaries.

But, as she looked around the office at those offerings of appreciation from the ranch's residents, Spadafor said she has no regrets about leaving that life to serve at St. Jude's.

"I came here and just fell in love with it," she said. "I had a feeling that I was supposed to be here. These really are the most important shareholders that I've ever had. We love them. I'm humbled by them every day."

"This is where I belonged."