

Inheriting More than Money

Suzanna inherited an affinity for community service from both of her parents. Her father was a judge, and her mother an active volunteer throughout her life. A former child actor and long-time volunteer herself, Suzanna says, "I've had the coolest life ever." She contacted AbilityFirst two years ago, bringing a love of learning and a commitment to advocacy from her professional life and 25 years of volunteer service. Her mother had volunteered at another Pasadena agency that serves individuals with developmental disabilities, and Suzanna decided to look for a similar experience.

Suzanna personifies the ideal of an effective volunteer: energetic, determined, willing to work and committed to the empowerment of individuals who are often underserved or overlooked. At AbilityFirst, she is devoted to helping individuals with disabilities and their families to overcome barriers to success and participate fully in their communities.

Currently, she is a receptionist at our community center Lawrence L. Frank in Pasadena. She began working one or two hours per day, and is now the full-time receptionist at the center from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm four days per week, and occasionally takes on special evening and weekend events as well. She enjoys learning the stories of the participants, parents and staff members. Yet that full-time role is not enough for her. She has also initiated two major projects that will benefit the agency and its programs, participants and families. Suzanna is preparing a resource book for families of center participants that contain a host of information about such topics as: Support groups for families and people with disabilities and much more. This resource guide can easily be adapted for use in other AbilityFirst centers and programs. The inspiration for this project was a similar guide Suzanna prepared to empower garment workers at a prior employer.

AbilityFirst recently inaugurated a new database for key participant information that also interfaces with our invoicing process to record attendance, eliminating time-consuming and error-prone paper recordkeeping. Suzanna provided a significant amount of assistance in the implementation of Procure by entering the participant data into the system and teaching families and participants the correct way to check in and out each day. Her support saved countless hours of staff time. In the process of collecting data, she learned about the participants' interests and backgrounds. She greets them personally when they come in, and has developed a good relationship with many parents as a result of her daily interactions with them. Suzanna also recognized that the database would be an effective way to collect volunteer information, and we are planning to implement this excellent suggestion agency-wide, as discussed above.

For Suzanna, AbilityFirst is part of a long tradition of community service. Since the 1980s, she has been an active volunteer and advocate for disenfranchised and at-risk members of the community, including babies infected with the AIDS virus, HIV-positive adults, patients of the Los Angeles Free Clinic, the animals at the Los Angeles Zoo, individuals who are homeless, and adults struggling with drug and alcohol addictions. She has brought to each organization her experience in the human resources field, her innate curiosity and her willingness to tackle any job. Although she's not planning to leave AbilityFirst any time soon, in the future she hopes to serve as an advocate for children in the foster care system.