

Women at Work

Meet 10 local visionaries who love what they do and do what they love

BY URBAN TULSA WEEKLY STAFF

Within the past few years, a lot of good ideas for Tulsa's development have been tossed about. But now it's time to get down to business. Urban Tulsa Weekly commends those Tulsans who have a vision and turn it into a reality. For that reason, we began publishing a small business issue each year.

In 2009, it's all about the ladies, for we've selected 10 local career women who have harnessed their passion and used it for the betterment of the city. UTW knows there are numerous outstanding female leaders in town and we keep up with them as their businesses grow. Our list is merely the tip of the iceberg.

So, it isn't unusual to see businesswomen nowadays; but these gals aren't distant, cold CEOs motivated by big paychecks and big, mahogany desks. The ones who made our list have been willing to get their hands dirty while taking on other enormous projects, like motherhood, for instance. They are the ultimate multi-taskers.

We've selected a diverse group that includes a doctor, an environmentalist, a job placement specialist, a restaurateur, a politician and more. Some are married and some are not; among those who are married, most acknowledged that their endeavors wouldn't have been possible if not for the support, both tangible and intangible, from loving husbands.

Although these savvy, proactive women lead very different lives with varying interests, all have worked hard to manifest their visions.



Carey Baker

President, Part-Time Pros

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It is commonly believed that the desires for both parenthood and a successful career are irreconcilable. The pursuit of one seems to negate the potential for the other. However, many are realizing that one does not have to choose between the two. Some even argue that fulfilling one's role as a parent enhances life in the professional world. It was this realization that inspired Carey Baker to launch her business, Part-Time Pros, in March of last year.

Part-Time Pros, 3320 E. 32nd St., is a job placement service targeted primarily at educated mothers who want to participate in the workforce. Baker and her staff recruit about 60-75 women seeking work per month, and then attempt to match them with their "ideal" job setting. Baker and her team take into account certain aspects of an applicant's personality that would fit well with a company's particular work environment.

PTP considers geographical location, the size of the company, how quickly the position needs to be filled, etc. in hopes to find a match that meets both parties' needs. Her clients also include a few men and some looking for full-time jobs.

Based on her own experience, Baker has observed that when employees find a job that more closely matches their expectations, everybody wins. Employees can avoid spending unnecessary and unwanted hours and work, while companies can save money by only paying for what duties they need performed.

Most importantly, employees who work shorter hours have more time to spend with their families. When Baker gave birth to her daughter, Katie, 16 months ago, she wasn't quite ready to sacrifice having a second income.

And so she did go back to work when she felt ready, but she began to notice how often she completed her day's work by 3pm, though still had to stay at the office, basically killing time until five.

"(That job) was kind of the old-school mindset of punch-in, punch-out, and that really kind of spring-boarded this concept for Part-Time Pros," said Baker. Thus she saw in those wasted hours an opportunity to find a more efficient fit for freeing up employees' precious family time as well save businesses some money.

Upon the birth of their child, her husband, Brett, asked her if she rather stay home with their daughter.

"While part of me thought I would like to stay home and raise my daughter, another part of me thought that my work is so much a part of my identity," she said.

"I love to work; I love the adult interaction; I love the stimulation, and I thought if I gave that up I would be changed- a different person."

Rita Scott

Manager and Founding Member

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Tulsa has been abuzz recently with all sorts of green initiatives. One in particular has proven itself to be part of the solution to a much larger problem facing our city: food insecurity.

Farmer's markets have been a part of mercantile culture for ages, and certainly have more recently enjoyed renewed popularity as consumers search for good, wholesome, locally grown goods--at reasonable prices.

One of the city's more recently established farmer's markets is the Pearl Farmer's Market, held in Centennial Park at 6th St. and Peoria Ave. The woman leading the project is Rita Scott, whose life has been a journey to rediscover her rural roots.

It began at childhood, when Scott visited her grandmother on the farm and was able to observe the relationship between her loved ones and the land. Scott remembered that the gardens were so abundant that her grandparents came to town but once per month.

"They raised their own pork. She had her own cows; she had her own chickens, which produced her eggs. They were the model of sustainability," she said. Likewise, Scott's parents lived on 20 acres, and farming was a way to supplement a budgeted food supply. Scott's clear respect for the Earth was instilled during her most formative years.

When Scott and her husband married in the '70s, they rented a small farmhouse for \$65 per month, 14 miles outside of Enid. Not long afterward, she gave birth to her two sons, Seneca and Bud. The Scott family lived pseudo-sustainably, though partly out of necessity. However, she felt that life was abundant, canning tomatoes for the winter and growing a colorful mix of fresh produce.

Shortly after having children though, her priorities shifted, as they often do for young families. They relocated to the Jenks school district, and adopted the quintessential suburban lifestyle of the 1980's onward.

Scott began her own horticulture business called Cottage Gardens, where she began working, for the first time in her life, closely with conventional toxic fertilizers, pesticides and the like. After a decade of enduring the harsh chemicals, Scott's health began to falter.

Her afflictions led her to Santa Fe, NM, where she threw herself into holistic medicine and learned about environmental illness. "I had to apply and work with chemicals. I just think that after a 10-year period, my system just broke down," she said.

Once she regained touch with a more organic lifestyle, Scott became inspired to spread the healing goodness of her own experience.

From the get-go, Pearl was meant to empower Tulsans who occupied the fringe of midtown. Newsome Community Farms takes care of people farther north, while the Cherry Street market caters to more centrally located citizens. Partnerships have been forged with the Indian Health Care Resource Center and other organizations, giving those in need choices between grass-fed meats and fresh produce via grocery vouchers.

In the future, Scott hopes to see food stamps accepted at farmer's markets here and beyond, for that would only increase accessibility to wholesome food. An intimate, mutually beneficial relationship with the Earth is not far off. "We don't have to reinvent; we just have to remember," said Scott.

Karen Keith

County Commissioner, City of Tulsa

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When we talked to Karen Keith, the District 2 Tulsa County commissioner just inaugurated Jan. 5, she was in the throes of moving, shuffling stacks of boxes in her new office on the third floor of the Tulsa County Administration Building.

Even so, she refused to dwell on the headaches of the move.

"I'm having a big map made of my district to put on my wall," she said. "I need one I can mark on to show what needs to be finished. That 87th West Ave. bridge has been on the books for years. And, we need to re-do Avery Drive from the bed, up."

Though this is her first stint as an elected official, Keith has never shied from the public eye. After a broadcast journalism internship at KTUL Channel 8, Keith spent her cub reporter years in Joplin, Colorado Springs and Oklahoma City. She found her way back to Tulsa where she signed on at KJRH Channel 2 and gave Tulsans the news for more than 20 years.

Her first experience in politics came in 2002 when she served as Tulsa Mayor Bill LaFortune's director of community relations. While a member of the team working for the passage of Vision 2025, she caught the bug for public service.

"People would come to me and say I should run for office," she said. "I didn't do it then, but it really planted a seed."

When at a 2007 holiday lunch friends prodded her again to run for office and she obliged.



Karen Keith

By March, she had resigned from her post at the Convention & Visitors Bureau with the Tulsa Chamber of Commerce and had thrown her hat into the race for District 2 of Tulsa County. On the evening of Nov. 4, after a close race with opponent Sally Bell, Keith emerged victorious.

"I was very relieved, and I was ready to go to work," she said, laughing. "That was pretty good, realizing that we did it."

As she settles into her office, Keith sets her sights on rebuilding the Tulsa County Juvenile Center on Gilcrease Museum Road.

"I'm already having meetings about it," she said, citing initial talks with architects. "We're going to get that thing moving as quickly as we can. I want to have this done within a year. That situation has gone on way too long."

Keith also plans to forge a county road improvement project during her first weeks in office. She hopes to qualify for funding from a pending Obama economic stimulus package that would pump money into public works projects.

In the years ahead, Keith looks to earn her place among the women she admires at the tops of local governments and businesses. Now a public official, she also once tried her hand at small business when she launched a bed and breakfast, which closed last year after more than 10 years in Brookside.

"I have gotten to know some fabulous businesswomen," she said, naming Linda Wingo, Jean Carter and Linda Bradshaw. "And, here at the county and at the city, we have some amazing female leaders. There are great examples here."

Tiffany Bjorlie

Owner, Lundeby's Eco Baby

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Tiffany Bjorlie compares the start up of her business to becoming a parent: "There's a lot to learn but it's very rewarding. You have to learn to adjust, to accept you'll make mistakes and that if you do it's not the end of the world."

It's a fitting comparison for the owner of Lundeby's Eco Baby, the baby store on Brookside committed to providing Tulsans non-toxic and organic toys, clothing, cloth diapers, bedding, furniture, skin care and more.

Running the business for just 10 months, Bjorlie started the company with her husband Jeremy as she herself contemplated becoming a parent. Realizing that the products she wanted for her own baby weren't easily accessible, the Bjorlies held off on starting their own family and established the store instead.

And the store has required as much responsibility as a baby would. Bjorlie is currently the only employee, investing more than 60 hours a week. She readily admits that it's been taxing at times, especially as she was learning to "ride the waves of retail's roller coaster. But, being a female, I already go up and down."

Her initial exhaustion subsided as she learned to balance her personal and professional life. She calls the store her second home and says that while it demands time and attention, it also provides her more freedom.

That freedom is important in the approach she's taken. Her focus on organic, ecologically conscious elements extends past the merchandise. Bjorlie purchases carbon offsets to counteract the store's carbon footprint; and her ultimate goal is to take the store off the grid. Her investigation into the products that she sells goes beyond determining if the products are organic to the practices of the vendors themselves. Product origins, employee conditions, shipment policies and more stay on Bjorlie's radar.

Her awareness applies to customers as well. With a business plan that aims to take her ethics to the checkout counter, Bjorlie doesn't believe in a high markup. "If I saw that something was cheaper online, I would buy it online." So, she sells her products at close-to wholesale prices.

And customers have responded positively. Bjorlie said that her customers aren't feeling the change in the economy, but there is a "psychological slow down" as she calls it. Eventually, Bjorlie will hire someone and cut back her own hours to start a family. But until then, she's the dedicated parent to Lundebly's Eco Baby.

Dr. Miriam Mills

M.D., Young People's Clinic

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After her second child had two open heart surgeries in two years, Dr. Miriam Mills decided to put teaching on hold and start treating kids.

"I had a lot more in common with mothers at that point than I did with medical students. I wanted to practice what I had preached," she said.

Mills founded Young People's Clinic, a general pediatrics practice augmented by osteopathic manipulation, at 3401 E. 21st St. in 1983. She remains its sole proprietor.

Osteopathic manipulation is a spectrum of interventions "that make the body parts fit together structurally so that they function better," Mills said. "You can balance the body in many different ways, including some that many associate with chiropractors."

During Tulsa's oil-boom years, Mills moved to town to take a job as medical director of the pediatric clinic at OU-Tulsa. When she decided to open her own practice a few years later, she started slowly. She worked part-time while she mothered her young children, and she added staff during several years. Her practice now employs three.

"We don't like supermarket medicine," Mills said. "There will always be a market for personal, intensive medicine where you listen to what people want and you take the time to educate them."

Trained as an M.D., Mills' interest in osteopathic manipulation was sparked when she was treated by a doctor of osteopathy after a car accident. Touting herself a born-again D.O., her service of what she called "both sides of the coin" caught on in the world of pediatrics.

"Tulsa is a pretty savvy city in terms of people who have been to chiropractors or osteopaths. Yet, there weren't any other pediatricians here that do that in the context of general pediatrics, and not all doctors of osteopathic medicine feel comfortable treating children."

Even so, Mills has maintained a small practice. The size of her outfit has stymied the pressure some doctors feel to see more patients per hour at larger practices.

"I wanted to feel good about what I did," she said. "I make less money than the average pediatrician, no doubt. But, the rewards are enormous."

Mills has also returned to teaching. She serves as clinical professor at Oklahoma State University College of Osteopathic Medicine, and she invites medical students to intern at her office. She also moonlights as an actress, giving performances at Heller Theater and the Tulsa Performing Arts Center.

"I love being in Tulsa," she said. "The people are so caring. It's like being in a small town and a big city at the same time."

To prepare for retirement, Mills plans to bring on another doctor at Young People's Clinic by summer and looks forward to devoting more time to research.

"Now is an ideal time for medicine to make a paradigm shift," she said. "If we're going to have a national health care system, we need to be making good choices about what type of health care we buy."

Judi Grove

Founder and Director

Breast Impressions Inc.

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Judi Grove remembers the first time she saw a breast cast. "I thought it was the most beautiful thing," she said.

Grove herself is not a breast cancer survivor (although cancer runs in her family), but in January of 2007 her doctor found she had a large mass in one breast and it would have to be removed. She recalled the body cast and instantaneously decided that she wanted to capture herself in 3D form. "It was just after that experience that I felt a calling," Grove said. "I wasn't a necessarily spiritual person, but I said 'Thank you, God' because I knew this was what I was supposed to do."

After 23 years working in life insurance, Grove was ready for an early retirement and a new, more enriching challenge. Grove's calling led her to establish Breast Impressions Inc., a local non-profit that raises awareness about breast cancer and provides education for young women. The organization sends breast casting kits to women all across the country who, like Grove did, want to remember a very special part of themselves.

The birth of Breast Impressions didn't come naturally to Grove, however. With the help of a silent partner and who Grove calls "special friends," she applied for non-profit status. Her lawyers told her to expect the rejection letters to pile up, but in March of 2007, her wish was granted and Breast Impressions was born as a 501(c)(3) non-profit.

The business side of running Breast Impressions has taken her to uncharted territory, where her initial frustrations began. She's had to learn the ins and outs of marketing, branding, and the power of good writing. "I begged for help with the grant writing after receiving so many denial letters," Grove said. "A huge part of this has been finding the right way to reach people, to reach those survivors."

Breast Impressions gives 100 percent of all proceeds to the project. "I was always appalled by places that give 10 percent, 15 percent or 20 percent," Grove said. "I wanted to give it all." Breast Impressions sends free casting kits to the women, who must first send Grove their diagnosis. "And then they get to make a memory prior to their surgery."

In 23 months, the non-profit has raised more than \$20,500 for breast cancer research and education. But no amount of money can ease the emotional weight that Grove and breast cancer survivors endure. "It's been the most humbling experience of my entire life. The women are tremendous. They are conquering breast cancer and that is so touching and meaningful to me.

"When you face death and then conquer it, you have a new appreciation and see things a lot differently. You don't sweat the small stuff."

In giving one receives, and Grove's knows how rewarding Breast Impressions has been in that regard. Her advice: "Find your niche and do something for someone else."

Charlotte Zakharian Jones

President

Liberty Flags Inc., Tulsa Executive Exchange

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In 1990, as her career in advertising was taking flight, Charlotte Zakharian Jones got a call that changed the course of her life.

Her father, Art Zakharian, had suffered a heart attack and needed help with the family business. Charlotte packed her bags, moved home and kept Liberty Flags Inc., Tulsa's clearinghouse for all that is Old Glory, up and running while her father recovered.

An Armenian immigrant from the former Soviet Union, Art Zakharian long had a dream of owning his own business. He came to the U.S. to fulfill that dream when he was barely 20.

"My dad always used to say, 'This is the greatest country in the world, but you'll never know that. You'll never understand it to the depth I do,'" Charlotte said.

Though her father didn't live to see the business he founded evolve from its storefront at 26th and Sheridan in 2006 to a stand-alone building south of 51st and Mingo, Art's family remembers him in the star in the company's new logo. The company celebrates its 27th year in business this year.

Since Charlotte came to the helm at Liberty Flags in 1995, she said the company, which remains a family business, has grown ten-fold. Charlotte manages the flagship retail store as well as federal, state and local government contracts for flags and supplies. All Oklahoma state agencies are outfitted with flags supplied by Liberty Flags Inc.

"For the first five years, I wanted to learn as much as I could about running the business; and I wanted to help my parents. But then, seeing the results of my hard work, I was more motivated to stay here. I saw there was an opportunity to grow the business. And, I had fallen in love with Tulsa."

Charlotte has proven herself an effective leader. Though last year's books looked "a little bit different" thanks to the tanked economy, "all the way up to November, growth was up 12 percent from last year."

Charlotte also heads the social committee with Tulsa Executive Exchange, an exclusive networking group for about two dozen local businesswomen. The group meets monthly to exchange leads and discuss industry issues. Charlotte has been a member for three years.

"We're a support group for one another in a lot of ways," she said. "It's nice to have that network because when you're a group of small business owners, it's different than working for a large corporation where you just call the department that handles such and such a problem. I know I'm not alone."

"We're like mentors to one another. That's priceless."

The next five years promise to be profitable for Liberty Flags, Charlotte said. By spring she plans to launch an updated version of the company's Web site; and she hopes to hire as many as 20 by next inauguration day.

"We'll see where our new Web site takes us," she said, smiling.

Heather Oakley

Founder and Executive Director

Global Gardens

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Since the dawn of formal education, children have been forced to sit still indoors for the bulk of the school day. Students must channel this unused energy somehow, and more often it comes out negatively, especially with the abandonment of physical education and arts programs.

Students at Eugene Field Elementary, 2249 S. Phoenix Ave., and Rosa Parks Elementary, 13702 E. 46th Pl. South, have been given a lively boost in their schooling with the addition of Global Gardens, founded and run by Heather Oakley. What began as volunteer work grew into its own 501(c)(3) in two short years. Local foundations and different community groups fund the program through grants and donations.

Every class has a plot in the garden, and students can participate in any way they'd like. From planting and painting to songwriting and pruning, a garden setting offers countless ways for children to harness their creative talents. During the winter, students are still involved- painting signs or writing stories about garden themes.

There's also an after-school aspect to it as well, where each child can tend their own plot and harvest its fruits and vegetables.

Oakley majored in Botany at OU; and creating an organization like Global Gardens has been a lifelong dream. As a child, Oakley spent a lot of time in the garden, planting tulips and cultivating her green thumb.

But before college, she spent four months in Uganda working in a school for orphaned boys, who worked on a farm to generate income for the school. Villagers helped out as well. "I saw a lot of sustainable agriculture and started thinking about how food affects people and how they can earn a living and do something for their community and environment all at the same time," she said.

Oakley's interest in gardening continued, and peaked while she taught science to students in Harlem; there, she held an after school gardening program, which she says was one of the few ways to engage students. Oakley earned graduate degrees in Science Education and International Development with an emphasis on peace studies.

"What I've done with Global Gardens is combined science education and peace education. Obviously, being in the garden is peaceful," she said. "We're teaching kids how to relate peacefully, so we have a peace table in the garden where they can do conflict resolution...we talk about that stuff everyday; it's a big part of what we do."

Principal Cindi Hemm didn't think twice about giving Oakley a chance to bring her idea to fruition; and the students were all too happy to get their hands dirty. After conferring with teachers, the program kicked off in January of 2007.

"Part of our mission is empowering students to be the change they want to see in their communities...Last year one of our students said, 'If our garden can be peaceful, then our school can be peaceful, then the community can be peaceful...and then the whole world.'" Children have a knack for seeing the interconnectedness among us all.

Though the program has grown by leaps and bounds, Oakley hasn't stopped dreaming. She wants the idea to spread far and wide, perhaps globally. But for now, she remains in Tulsa with her husband, who has shown unwavering support for her efforts.

Suzie Palazzo

Owner and Manager

Lola's at the Bowery

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Suzie Palazzo unexpectedly met the love of her life eight years ago. With 25 years in the restaurant business, Suzie, who goes by "Lola," immediately recognized the beauty of the former Bowery location at Main and Brady. She loved the space, but told herself that it was time to throw in the towel and retire from the business. She had just moved to Tulsa after living in Santa Fe for 15 years. "But for some reason I couldn't let go of the space," she said. "So, I finally made the call, made a kitchen, opened some walls and opened in April of 2004."

Lola wanted to bring a one-of-a-kind restaurant to downtown, particularly to the Brady District, but recognized any endeavor would be a challenge due to its lack of activity. She echoed the same phrase many Tulsans who long to see downtown revitalized say: the need for a place to eat, work and play.

So, Lola set out to create an eclectic restaurant, something out of the ordinary. And it hasn't been easy. "We still function on a day-to-day, week-to-week basis," she said. "And I have thought about giving it up for financial reasons. But I don't do it for the money."

Open six days a week for dinner only, Lola's at the Bowery partly relies on the crowds that Cain's Ballroom and Brady Theater draw. When those two venues lock their doors, the Brady District stays relatively quiet at night. "And it can be scary down here," Lola said. The fear, however, is no greater here than in other major cities where the downtown night scene calls all kinds of creatures out to play. "I've even had people call and ask if it's safe to come down here and park their cars," Lola said.

From the food on the tables to the local art on walls and the live music in the air, Lola's at the Bowery offers "a place where you can forget the troubles of the world; you can leave refreshed and nourished," as Lola put it. "We feed the soul."

Lola described the food as Mediterranean, with offerings on the menu including entrees such as Pollo a la Plancha and Shrimp al a Mangione. She commends the local produce companies for their incredible attention to detail and reliability. Lola also strives to use the freshest fruits and vegetables. She pointed out that very rarely is an ingredient conventionally grown.

Lola's regularly features local artwork on the walls, which gives the artists great exposure. "I see it as they are doing me a favor by putting their beautiful artwork on the walls," Lola said. "But I think I have an eye for good art."

Most days of the week diners can enjoy the soft sounds of local musicians. Frequent performers include Susan Herndon, Travis Fite, Rebecca Ungerman, Paul Benjamin Band and Full Flava Kings. The building is acoustically sound and has seen big names in the past when it was The Bowery. "I've never run a venue before, but I love bringing the new, young talent in here," she said.

Today, running a local restaurant is an art form that requires knowing the community and its wants and needs. "My fear is that corporate America is going to come down here. If you brought 71st Street down here, I'd be gone," Lola said.

For now, she cleans the bathrooms herself, adorns the bar with fresh flowers and makes it her mission to keep her home away from home afloat.



Susie Palazzo

Judy Gann

Director, New Hope Oklahoma

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Judy Gann breathes a deep sigh of relief before expressing that she has the best husband in the world. She works long hours and is gone several weeks and weekends out of the year. Without his loving support, she wouldn't be able to enjoy the fulfillment she gleans from her full-time career.

Gann serves as the director of New Hope, a locally-based non-profit organization that provides programming for Oklahoma children with a parent in prison. Oklahoma incarcerates more women per capita than any other state; and, in many cases, these women are mothers who must leave behind their children. Their offspring are seven times more likely to end up in prison themselves.

New Hope began in 1992 as a ministry at Trinity Episcopal Church. The program served as a one-week camp until 10 years ago, when its success brought Gann aboard full-time. It was about that time when she realized that New Hope needed to step away from the church in order to establish itself as a non-profit. Locating funds posed the greatest challenge to Gann, especially when it came time for grant-writing. And then there was somewhat of a gender issue. "As a woman, it was difficult to convince the board members of what we needed to do," Gann said. "They thought there was a lack of experience on my part."

After convincing the board of the necessary steps toward establishing New Hope, Gann and her small group of volunteers began on the next all-important task for any business: networking; and Gann felt great relief when she realized just how willing foundations were to listen. "The perception is that these funders don't have time to talk," Gann said. "But that's not the case. They are happy to listen."

Today, New Hope serves more than 100 Oklahoma children ages 8-17 in its various camping and after-school programs. The kids participate in educational, character-building exercises, which include sports, art and crafts, field trips and service to the poor. The organization also sends case workers to check on families and make sure basic needs are met.

With eight members on the part-time staff, Gann uses referrals from schools, DHS, word of mouth and Family and Children Services to find children who need that active, caring adult role fulfilled. "We want to provide them with a loving relationship with an adult," Gann said. "They need caring adults and peers, and they need to learn to relate to each other. They need a place to feel safe."

One can imagine the social stigma attached to these kids as they develop socially and academically. "They find a sense of relief when they come to New Hope and realize 'Hey, there are other kids just like me.'"

Future plans include diversifying the staff, attending national conferences on counselor training, increasing the programs and funding, and, as always, serving more children.

After all, Gann and her staff monitor these children each step of the way through the New Hope program. Gann said the most rewarding part of her job is seeing the children develop into strong, loving individuals, who, like she taught her own two children, should see beyond themselves and seek opportunities to help those in need.

"Some of our middle school girls decided they wanted to feed the homeless," she said. "So they took the initiative entirely on their own and now we do it two times a week. The girls would come every day to feed the poor if they could. They say they want to start a shelter!"