

Erika's Lighthouse Helps Hope Grow

BY LIBBY ELLIOTT
DAILYNORTHSHORE.COM

Heather Freed always knows what to expect at the office in the days following a local or national tragedy involving teenagers.

"We see an uptick in people reaching out to us," said Freed, executive director of Erika's Lighthouse, the Winnetka-based non profit founded nearly 15 years ago to educate school communities about teen depression. "It's typically teachers, education administrators or kids wanting to start a discussion about the issue of depression in their school. Unfortunately, tragedy is sometimes the trigger that motivates them."

It was the tragic suicide of 14-year-old Winnetka middle schooler Erika Neuckranz – who suffered from severe depression – that prompted her parents, Ginny and Tom, to found Erika's Lighthouse in 2004. Grieving from the loss of their daughter, the Neuckranz family sought to eliminate the stigma associated with mental illness and empower teens to take charge of their mental health. Today, Erika's Lighthouse's innovative programs on depression awareness are taught in 28 states, reaching 77,492 teens in 2017 alone.

"We've found that our biggest impact happens in the classroom, working directly with teachers to get our materials and programming out there," said Freed.

On May 12, Erika's Lighthouse will hold its annual fundraiser, "Hope Grows," at Sunset Ridge Country



Erika's Lighthouse administration, from left: Kristina Kins, Jennifer Lande, Heather Freed, Shira Lichtenstein, and Peggy Kubert. PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEORGE PFOERTNER

Club in Northfield. With the help of its nine-member volunteer Board of Directors and 25 member Lighthouse Council, Erika's Lighthouse expects the gala event will raise up to \$100,000 to support its 2018-19 school initiatives, including continued efforts to reach a wider audience, and redesign and rebrand the organization's website.

The evening will feature a seated dinner, program, live auction, paddle raise and dancing to the music of Gritman & Moran band.

of five Erika's Lighthouse staff. "And with our website, the goal is to create turn key programs that are easily accessible to teachers so they can generate discussion in their classrooms on the subject of depression. Depression should be as easy to talk about as cancer or diabetes."

According to Erika's Lighthouse statistics, as many as 20 percent of all teenagers will experience at least one depressive episode before they reach adulthood. It's the combination of hormones and the struggle

The non-profit's other fundraising efforts include the 2018 Bank of America Chicago Marathon on October 7, when a team of 46 marathons from all over the country will run in support of Erika's Lighthouse.

"Our goal is to continue expanding the work we do on a national scale," said Freed, who manages a team

for independence, said Freed, that makes teens so susceptible to depression.

"Stress, anxiety, lack of sleep, and the tendency for teens to have an online presence 24/7 are also precursors for depression," said Freed.

Erika's Lighthouse encourages teens to speak up about depression. The Erika's Lighthouse Teen Club program is available for high schools within 50 miles of Winnetka; the organization's Depression Awareness Campaign is designed so that even a single student can raise depression awareness in his or her school or community.

Erika's Lighthouse uses video-based classroom programming materials – available free of charge – that always feature real students telling real stories, rather than actors. Helping students recognize what teen depression looks like, said Freed, enables early detection and intervention.

"That's really what differentiates Erika's Lighthouse from other organizations," said Freed. "We go directly to teens."

The national anti-gun student protests that rippled across the United State last month, said Freed, illustrate the power teens can wield when they're given a platform to talk about important issues, whether it's gun violence or mental health.

"Schools are starting to get it," said Freed. "If you want to really make change you've got to get kids involved."

For more information on Erika's Lighthouse, visit www.erikalighthouse.org.

Diapers On The Run

MOBILE PANTRY SERVES FAMILIES IN NEED

BY JULIE KEMP PICK
DAILYNORTHSHORE.COM

You've heard about the popularity of food trucks. How about a van filled with diapers?

Given that one in three families in the United States is in need of diapers, a non profit called Twice As Nice Mother & Child launched a mobile diaper pantry in April to bring diapers to the Lake County community.

Twice As Nice Mother & Child, based in Gurnee, provides diapers to more than 2,000 children across 31 ZIP codes in Lake County.

"One shocking statistic that most people don't realize is that safety net programs like WIC and food stamps can't be used to buy diapers, so if you have a family that's struggling to make ends meet, it's more difficult to provide this basic need for their kids," said Ann Marie Mathis, founder/executive director.

Mathis, the mom of seven kids under age nine, started Twice As Nice Mother & Child in 2010 because she felt blessed to have the means to provide whatever her kids needed, and she knew many people weren't as fortunate.

Mathis said parenting is challenging enough without having to worry about providing basic needs for children. She also had concerns about donating her children's gently used items to other charitable organizations.

"I think when we make donations sometimes, we take for granted that they go where they tell you they're going to go," said Mathis. "I just wanted to make sure that these items got into the hands of the people that really needed them."

This motivated Mathis to research how to start a

non profit, and she began collecting items from her basement, as donations poured in from family, friends and neighbors. Soon she outgrew her basement and moved her inventory into a storage facility.

During this process she realized that there were things beyond clothing, shoes and baby gear that families needed; hence, Twice As Nice Mother & Child evolved into distributing diapers, wipes and formula.

Mathis said it wasn't until Twice As Nice Mother & Child joined the National Diaper Bank Network in 2014 that she realized what a significant problem diaper need really is in the United States.

"An infant averages 10 to 12 diapers a day and a toddler is around seven to eight, so you can easily go through about 100 diapers a week if you have an infant," said Mathis. "The average cost of diapers for a family is between \$80 and \$100 per month per child."

There are no state or federal assistance programs for diaper need. Though Illinois is working on reducing the amount of sales tax on diapers, Mathis said that's not going to alleviate the problem.

Huggies is a founding sponsor of the National Diaper Bank Network, so it provides most of the diapers and pull-ups for Twice As Nice Mother & Child, while other brands are accepted strictly by donations. Twice As Nice Mother & Child purchases about 90 percent of the diapers that it distributes, and 10 percent are donated through either individuals or drives that they host.

Unfortunately, complications can ensue from families who misuse their diapers.

"Sometimes families with limited resources try to make their diapers stretch as long as possible, which means they don't change them as often or try to reuse the diapers," said Mathis. "Then it just leads to health

problems and unexpected medical expenses, which further entrenches them in that cycle of poverty."

She added that another misconception is that larger sized diapers or pull-ups will last longer, but more often than not they leak. Diapers and pull-ups need to be properly sized.

Twice As Nice Mother & Child is a 100 percent volunteer-run organization, and Mathis works with 10 other volunteers. Her four older children -- ages nine, eight, six and almost five -- also help out on packing, sorting and bagging days. In addition, she takes them to some events.

"In today's society, it's nice for kids to see that sometimes people struggle, and to show them that it's important to give back to the less fortunate," said Mathis. "Getting involved in your community in some way should be a part of their growing up process, because it's important to take care of people when you have a chance to."

In 2017, the organization distributed 200,000 diapers to Lake County families, which Mathis said was about 100,000 more than the previous year.

"This year we're on target to probably hit the 300,000 mark (with the mobile diaper pantry program). I've been working on this idea since last year and through



Twice As Nice Mother & Child mobile diaper pantry.

the support of Lake County Community Foundation with a grant, as well as the two distribution sites that we're partnering with, it's become a reality."

Mathis said Twice As Nice Mother & Child's goal is to make distributions via the mobile pantry twice a month. She explained that the organization's hope is to connect Lake County residents who don't have transportation or are busy working or going to school, with their programs through the mobile pantries.

Future distribution dates will be posted on the organization's Facebook page and website.

For more information call 224-637-1644 or visit: www.twiceasnicemc.org.