

NONPROFIT *of the year* ST. JUDE'S RANCH

"I was only supposed to come help them turn it around for six months to a year," recalls Christine J. Spadafor, chief executive officer of the St. Jude's Ranch for Children for the past six-plus years, "and here we still are."

Why did she stick around?

"I fell in love," Spadafor explains simply, "with the beautiful children who have been abused, abandoned, neglected and left homeless, and a committed, talented staff and a dedicated board; everyone just wanting to do the right thing for these kids, who are easily forgotten. What a tremendous mission. I was privileged to be part of it, and when they asked me to stay on and be CEO I enthusiastically gave them a yes."

St. Jude's Ranch is a local nonprofit organization founded in 1967 that is dedicated to serving the needs of abused, abandoned and neglected children and families. The group had reached out to her on a consulting basis because it had received a report from an outside group that indicated the ranch was on the verge of bankruptcy. "And so the board was looking for someone with experience in doing a turnaround to come in and do an analysis to see if there was any possible way for the ranch to stay open."

The turnaround that started in 2006 was completed in 2008. The result? "We're taking care of more kids than ever," notes Spadafor. "That's one big difference. We take care of more than a hundred children. We have a facility in Boulder City and two in Texas. We also just opened our new Crossings Program" located at McLeod Drive and Tropicana Avenue, and which had its grand opening on June 11. "It's the first St. Jude's Ranch campus out of Boulder City in its 45-year history."

Crossings is a supportive housing program for homeless 18 to 25 year olds, providing temporary housing services while residents complete high school or college degrees, learn job skills and receive medical and

mental health services.

The turnaround worked. Year-over-year operating losses were turned into, for the past six years, operating surpluses. "There was a \$2-million financed debt when we started our turnaround," says Spadafor. "We have paid off all our debt; we are a debt-free organization." Indeed, the Ranch's turnaround story has become, if not the stuff of legend, at least a tool for educators: it is now a best practice case study that is taught in the MBA curriculum at Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth University.

As the architect of the turnaround, however, Spadafor is quick to note that "architects only design the house. It takes everyone to build it. The turnaround was a full team effort: board, staff, kids, donors, community."

State and county agencies reimburse the Ranch for three out of seven nights of care, and so the group must fundraise for the other four nights. Fully 86c of every dollar is spent on direct services for the children, exceeding the national benchmark of 65c for non-profits that are generally considered to be performing well.

"We continue to have a growth agenda, to build on what we've done just in the last few years," says Spadafor. "In the last three years, again

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St. Jude's Ranch Crossings is a supportive housing program for homeless young adults between the ages of 18 and 25. It held its grand opening this past June.

with surpluses and no debt, we have started eight new programs organization-wide to take care of more kids, including young adults and families. We have expanded our service group."

Earlier this year, the organization also completed its acquisition of Child Focus, a nonprofit organization specializing in maintaining the bonds of siblings who become separated while in foster care. By joining forces, the organizations hope to increase the level of support and resources

currently dedicated to sibling preservation in southern Nevada.

Going forward, says Spadafor, the goal is "to care for more children, young adults and families who need our services; to basically expand the numbers of persons that we serve as well as start new programs that meet the unmet needs in the community; making sure that we have happy, thriving children. That's what we're really known for: we have unique programs that other organizations do not have."

For example, the group's Pregnant & Parenting Teen Program is unique in Southern Nevada. It keeps mothers and babies together, preserving the family unit by teaching parenting and job skills and allowing mothers to continue their education. In community partnership with Sunrise Children's Foundation, St. Jude's established an on-site Early Head Start Program for children ages six weeks to three years, providing services for teen mothers' babies and young siblings who are part of large sibling groups that live with us.

— Howard Riell