



From a Place of Vulnerability

Big Brothers Big Sisters CEO Empowers Staff

By DEIRDRE NEWMAN

Just before **Melissa Beck** took over as chief executive of Santa Ana-based **Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County and the Inland Empire**, staff turnover was more than 50% a year, she said.

She took the reins in July 2013 with a primary goal of changing the organization's culture. She called herself "chief empowerment officer" and said she began enabling her staff, focusing on their strengths.

Revenue under her leadership increased from \$2.5 million in 2012 to a projected \$6 million-plus this year, she said, and the number of children served rose from 2,000 to 3,750.

Beck was a recipient of a Business Journal Women in Business award on May 2 at Hotel Irvine (see profiles of the other winners, pages 1, 6, 8 and 13).

Many people have noticed her commitment to empowering others, including one Big Brothers Big Sisters' board member, **Cary Hyden**, a partner with the Costa Mesa law office of **Latham & Watkins LLP**.

"Melissa is a natural leader," he said via email. "She is not only a wonderful strategic thinker but her commitment to empowering her team allows Big Brothers Big Sisters to achieve great successes in its mission of creating impactful and positive mentoring relationships for the youth of Orange County."

Mentorship Believer

Beck started at the nonprofit in late 2012, coming from the directorship at the **Univer-**



Beck: 'vulnerability leads to credibility'

sity of California-Irvine's Center for Investment and Wealth Management. She said she's convinced that obtaining an MBA from UCI's Executive MBA program sealed the deal, enabling the board to feel comfortable about giving her the top position at age 33.

She was drawn to Big Brothers Big Sisters because she "truly believe(s) mentoring is intrinsic to success in life, no matter your background."

The nonprofit serves youth facing "adversity," which Beck defines as "challenges due to circumstances outside their control." The children served typically come from low-in-

come, single-parent minority households, Beck said. They also experience other things that increase their chances of dropping out of school and limit opportunities for "success," including being the first generation to graduate from high school, incarceration of one or both of their parents at some point in their lives, and exposure to abuse and neglect at home.

Empowering Staff

Another of Beck's goals is to "create the most progressive, forward-thinking nonprofit in the country." To that end, she got the board's consent in February to implement a policy that enables employees to receive their full salaries for three months when they take maternity or paternity leave.

She also created a "large-scale" professional and personal development program that includes job shadowing for entry-level staff, management training, annual service projects and 360-degree feedback, which gives employees performance feedback from all levels, including co-workers, direct supervisors, managers and directors.

Beck said she wants to create a culture in which employees can live up to their potential and that as a woman she brings something to the table that can help facilitate that: vulnerability.

"I'm a firm believer that vulnerability is the center of leadership, a willingness to be vulnerable about challenges and missteps, to put your ego aside and ask for help," she said. "And vulnerability leads to credibility, and you end up with a more trusting organization,

where outside-the-box ideas are shared freely because people are not afraid of being shut down or embarrassed."

Expanded Vision

The nonprofit has stretched itself in other ways since Beck joined it.

It expanded into the Inland Empire in 2013 with the financial support of the Irvine-based **A. Gary Anderson Family Foundation** in a five-year, \$3.5 million partnership that ends this year. The chapter has since diversified its revenue stream with grants from local cities, corporations and individuals. Of the 3,750 children it serves this year, 900 are in the Inland Empire.

The organization grew its physical footprint in September 2014 when it purchased a 52,500-square-foot building in Santa Ana for its headquarters. It generates additional revenue by leasing out half of the space. The former headquarters in Tustin was 8,000 square feet.

And it recently became the first chapter in the state to serve youth up to age 25. The Destination Future initiative is important, Beck said, because, "You make some really pivotal life decisions between 18 and 25 that will set you up for being financially self-sufficient in the future or not."

She secured \$1 million for the initiative with the support of family foundations that include the Irvine-based **DevTo Support Foundation**, Newport Beach-based **Tarsadia Foundation** and the Laguna Beach-based **Peter & Ginny Ueberroth Family Foundation**. ■

APPLIANCE-UPGRADING EXPANSION WARRIOR

Upgrading to an energy-efficient appliance is one thing that can save your small business big on energy bills. That's money that can be funneled right back into building your small business into an any-size-you-want business. Fabian knows this firsthand. His restaurant, Bella Pasta, is a well-extra-virgin-olive-oiled-machine, running on energy-efficient appliances, LED lights and good old-fashioned discipline. Fabian recently used his energy savings to upgrade to a brand-new space.

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