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Section: SOUTH TAMPA

A GIVING SPIRIT  
B.C. MANION

An inspired and inspiring teen demonstrates that young people can make a big difference.

BEACH PARK - When she was just 14, **Jennifer Sasso** saw a drawing that changed the course of her life. The picture showed a man striking a woman, with a child looking on.

It was labeled: The night before we came to The Spring.

When Sasso saw the illustration, it inspired her to get involved.

She decided she wanted to do art projects with the kids at The Spring, a shelter for abused women and their children.

She started small.

In the beginning, she would use any materials she could find, recalls her mother, Karen. "She started out with paint samples and paint sticks: "What can I make this week?" "

"I felt a little bit like a scavenger," Sasso said.

Then she started hitting up local stores for contributions.

"The first donation I actually got was from Wal-Mart," she said. It was a \$20 voucher to spend in the store.

Creative Fundraising

She began thinking bigger.

She went after a grant. She didn't get it.

"They declined my application because I was not a 501 (C)(3) (tax exempt corporation)," said Sasso, now 18.

Undeterred, she turned to her father, Gary, a lawyer, to help her set up a nonprofit corporation.

She called it Creative Kids Count Inc.

She's the president and serves on the board. Her dad, two friends, and a faculty adviser are on the board.

But Sasso has reached well beyond her family, her circle of friends and classmates at Berkeley Preparatory School in her quest to help kids.

She has recruited an army of volunteers.

Like her, they're kids.

She's also written to companies across the country asking for help. One company, in Philadelphia, donated thousands of clear plastic bags. Another company, in St. Louis, provided thousands of labels.

Not every request has yielded good results.

One place responded by sending her an eight-pack of crayons, her mother recalled.

But Sasso kept on.

Persistence Pays

Through the years, she has obtained more than \$35,000 in grants and private donations. She even organized a drive at her school that yielded \$1,212.18 in pennies.

She uses the money to provide art projects and special parties for children.

Volunteer crews assemble art kits with items such as feathers, pipe cleaners, wiggly eyes and sequins that are dropped off each month at hospitals, shelters and orphanages.

Sasso also gives art lessons at The Spring, The Children's Home, The Salvation Army Hospitality House, the

Brighter Community Preschool and YMCA Success Centers.

The teenager's work has has garnered considerable attention and accolades.

Her corporation got a letter from President Bush, after she initiated a project involving Berkeley students. The youngsters made cards and wrote letters to the families affected by the Sept. 11 attacks. Sasso reproduced four of the cards for a fundraiser, raising about \$500 for the Children's Fund in New York.

She was featured in Seventeen magazine as one of a half-dozen recipients nationwide of a Seventeen/ Cover Girl Volunteerism Award. The honor included a trip to Washington, where Sasso shook hands with first lady Laura Bush and spent time with WNBA star Nikki McCray, and pop stars Jessica Simpson and Brandi.

She and her father had a private audience with Janet Reno, when the gubernatorial candidate was attorney general, to discuss the work of Creative Kids.

But what seems to thrill Sasso most is knowing that there's no minimum age for serving others.

Still, it does take time to establish credibility in a society that tends to underestimate what teens can contribute, Sasso said.

A Telling Introduction

An experience during a banquet sponsored by the National Conference for Community and Justice helps illustrate that point.

H. Roy Kaplan, executive director of the NCCJ, played a trick on the audience.

To introduce Sasso, he described her long list of accomplishments, and then he had her come forward.

"They gasped. They couldn't believe it," Kaplan said. They hadn't expected a teenager.

Sasso used the speech to talk up how much kids have to offer, and the value of being involved.

"Volunteer work, to me, is a matter of passion, not obligation," she told the crowd.

Sasso's dedication and humility set her apart, say those who have watched her at work.

"There's an inner quality there," said Donna Arnold, coordinator of volunteer services at Tampa General Hospital.

"You can sit with her and listen to her, and you can foresee great things in her future," said Arnold, who met Sasso more than three years ago.

"She is an awesome kid. I mean, unbelievable," said Ann Topping, program manager for The Salvation Army Hospitality House.

In one project, Sasso and a crew of volunteers collected chairs for the kids at the shelter to paint and to give to the hospitality house, hospitals and orphanages.

"We went around to local furniture stores. The first place we went in, they said, 'Oh sure. Here's a chair.' We thought it was going to be easy," Sasso recalled.

After that first taste of success, it was slow going.

There were heartwarming moments, however.

At one store, a clerk told Sasso: "The manager of this store doesn't generally do things like that." But the clerk added, "If you can wait for me to get my paycheck, I'll contribute a chair."

Overwhelmed by Sasso's generosity, Topping created an award so the young woman could be its first recipient.

"She just gave and gave and gave," Topping said.

Looking Ahead

Sasso graduates Sunday and plans to attend Duke University, in Durham, N.C., this fall. In her free time, she plans to focus her efforts on helping other young people create their own volunteer programs.

In the long term, she wants to pursue law and perhaps enter politics.

Society tends to underestimate how much young people can contribute, Sasso said.

She doesn't.

"Some of the kids that I work with are incredibly motivated and driven and confident," Sasso said.

As she prepares to leave for college, she has already tapped another young leader to take over her Tampa operations.

She's entrusted the work to Katie Alberts, another Berkeley student.

"She's got the spirit to do it," Sasso said. (CHART) (C) SASSO'S HONORS Here's a partial list of **Jennifer Sasso's** honors and awards: Toyota Community Scholar, 2002.

Salvation Army Hospitality House Volunteer of the Year, 2002.

Target Community Scholar, 2002.

Sertoma Club Service to Mankind Award, 2002.

Children's Home "Above and Beyond the Call of Duty" volunteerism award, 2002.

Tampa Preservation Inc.'s individual achievement award, 2002.

United Way Golden Achievement Award, 2001.

Seventeen/Cover Girl Volunteerism Award, 2001.

Youth in Philanthropy Award, 2001.

Berkeley Preparatory School Humanitarian Award, 2001.

Athena Society Young Woman of Promise, 2001.

St. Joseph's Kids are Heroes Community Award, 2000.

PHOTO (3C) CHART (C)

Tribune photos by BRUCE HOSKING (C) On a recent visit to Tampa General Hospital, **Jennifer Sasso**, right, helps Yei Marie Ruiz put together a small art project.

(C) Yei Marie Ruiz decorates a small flowerpot with paint while Tampa General's Child Life Specialist Nicole