



family
FOCUS

"I feel like an ugly duckling who landed in the right pond," says Gena VanOsselaer, Executive Director of Austin Children's Shelter since 2001.

Gena VanOsselaer, Executive Director, Austin Children's Shelter

Head smarts got her an MBA and a career in high tech until this IBM veteran discovered she had the heart of a social worker.

Story by Marilyn McCray
Photo by Korey Howell Photography

GENA VANOSSELAER SPENT 20 YEARS AT IBM but admitted that she never really felt passion for the work she did. Like many others, she attended The University of Texas, got an MBA and went on to a good job at a large corporation. Pretty standard stuff, except that on business trips, she read human-interest stories and kept a file, knowing that someday these stories would have an impact on her life.

Then VanOsselaer became a member of Leadership Austin's class of 2001. It was her third try and an experience that would change her life. "I'm their poster child," she reflects on the program designed to develop and connect leaders in Austin's business, nonprofit and government communities. "The once-a-month meeting with people who were so passionate really changed my life. Leadership Austin motivated me to put my skills to work in community service."

One of the members of Leadership Austin, the executive director of CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates for abused and neglected children) told VanOsselaer about an opening at the Austin Children's Shelter. Three weeks later in August of 2001, she joined ACS, an agency that provides a safe haven for children who are the victims of life-threatening violence and neglect. As executive director, VanOsselaer's all-encompassing role would be to oversee operations, programs, strategic planning, advocacy, accounting, fundraising, marketing, facilities management and volunteer coordination with a staff of 70-plus.

After 9/11, everything changed. VanOsselaer described the events as the perfect storm when funding sources from both public and private sectors abruptly dried up. Her business background, persistence and ability to run a large organization

gave her an in-depth understanding of the corporate world. She spoke the language and had the ability to build the right relationships. In addition she could define the results and return to all shareholders. Her skills have served the ACS well in the intervening years allowing the shelter to overcome setbacks like the loss of United Way's Community Investment Fund support.

When asked about the changes she has seen since she arrived at the shelter, VanOsselaer points to the child welfare system, which is underfunded

Although most placements are handled confidentially, VanOsselaer and the staff found themselves in the news during the recent case between the State of Texas and the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. FLDS teen mothers and children spent about six weeks at the shelter during the high profile proceedings, which drew a mini media camp to the shelter's doorstep. The staff and volunteers worked to make the young women and children feel as normal and comfortable as possible. One volunteer paid to have the pia-

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and overburdened. She describes an increase in the severity of neglect, problems with the foster care system and more referrals from the psych and juvenile justice systems. The number of older children in these systems is also increasing.

Pressure on families who are already fragile – coupled with the lack of access to healthcare and social services – results in stress, substance abuse and anger. It is the most vulnerable who suffer. "When a family breaks down, it creates a spiraling effect," she said. Worse, child abuse can affect generations to come if untreated. "These kids will go on to abuse their own children," she said. Judge Jeanne Meurer finds it difficult to put into words how much VanOsselaer's dedication means to the shelter. "I know that when I have to make a decision to remove a child from his or her family that they will be in good hands at ACS."

no tuned for religious services and another volunteer assembled rocking chairs for the mothers. Several of the children even shared the chicken pox with some of the staff. When the families were reunited, the paintings were all that the children left behind. "There is no question that some bonds were formed," VanOsselaer said. "Ultimately we all learned that what was important is what we have in common more than the differences." (An update on the Shelter's experiences is available on the website).

It's not just during high profile cases like the FLDS' that VanOsselaer shines. Board member Sara Rathgeber described VanOsselaer as the perfect CEO who has presented a warm and compassionate picture of the Austin Children's Shelter to the media and the public. As the spokesperson and chief fundraiser, VanOsselaer's photo has appeared

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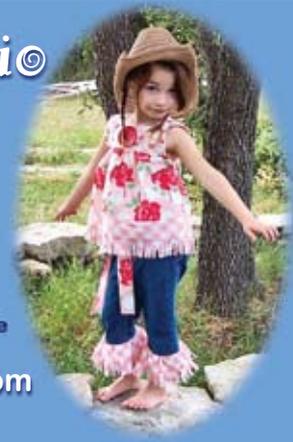
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troops for their service. If you think someone needs help – military or civilian – just do something.”

Like Rosie Babin, we must all find the bridge to cross over to a side of compassion and commitment and call on the angels within to lead us all there. ★

KAREN LANGLEY from page 65
three volunteer gigs with Habitat for Humanity, traveling to Mexico, Romania and in 2007 to New Zealand. Yes, this passionate volunteer spends her vacation time building houses. “It’s my passion,” she laughs, when teased about her all-out dedication.

Which brings her back to the rich rewards of volunteering and caregiving, at all ages. “I encourage young people out of college to volunteer and give of their life. It’s not about the money. It’s just about really and truly making a change and giving back to your community.” ★

MORE INFO

www.familyeldercare.org
512.450.0844
In-Home Care service:
512.467.6168

ANDREA SLOAN from page 67
job, I was diagnosed with stage III ovarian cancer,” she said.

As a cancer survivor, Sloan appreciates her restored health and the chance to do what she loves. “To paraphrase Pablo Coelho in his book, *The Alchemist*: ‘When the time is right, all of the planets conspire to give you the desires of your heart,’” she said. ★

MORE INFO

Texas Advocacy Project
www.texasadvocacyproject.org
512.476.5377
Family Violence Legal Line
800.374.HOPE
Family Law Hotline
800.777.FAIR
Sexual Assault Legal Hotline
888.296.SAFE

GENA VANOSSELAER from page 71
in newspapers, annual reports and on the websites of countless foundations usually accepting an oversized check, the result of a successful campaign. She has mastered the art of putting on makeup and contact lenses in the dark at 5:15 a.m. using her car’s rearview mirror before a live news interview. From a Star Trek Convention to a couture fashion show to black tie galas, VanOsselaer works tirelessly to increase awareness of the ACS.

In 2007, VanOsselaer and the board began a \$12.9 million capital campaign for construction of ACS’ new campus, Rathgeber Village, east of the Mueller airport area. Work began in February on the eight buildings that will double the space of the existing facility with appropriate housing and a charter school to see to the needs of the shelter’s residents. ACS had been forced to turn away more than 350 children annually and the new campus will allow the shelter to increase the number of children served.

These days, everyone in VanOsselaer’s own family participates in events and activities at ACS. VanOsselaer met her husband after completing her undergraduate degree. She was working at a law firm where she met Paul, one of the attorneys and married his brother Tom. They have two children, Tory and Trevor. With two demanding careers, the VanOsselaers have made adjustments to spend more time with their children. She joked about a fantasy Christmas card showing everyone in the family working on laptops – a common site most evenings around the VanOsselaer home. All joking aside, that kind of family unity is what Gena VanOsselaer so passionately seeks for all the children who pass through the doors of Austin Children’s Shelter. ★

MORE INFO

Austin Children’s Shelter
www.austinchildrenshelter.org
512.499.0090