

STYLE

JEANIE BUSS, THE LAKERS' LEADER



Wealth of Spirit: Giving at Holiday Time

BY ANA FIGUEROA

If, as Albert Einstein famously said, “The value of a man resides in what he gives,” then Beverly Hills is a city of great worth. Beyond the trappings that have caught the attention of the world, a spirit of generosity and a desire to make a positive difference for others lie at the heart of Beverly Hills.

A city blessed with riches has shown a true wealth of spirit during these most challenging of times. No sooner had the pandemic hit than civic groups were mobilizing to provide masks for first responders and meals to front line workers. Volunteers shopped for the elderly and businesses struggled to keep employees on the payroll.

“The pandemic has certainly shown us the strength of the human spirit,” Councilmember Julian Gold, M.D. told the Courier. “We have seen tremendous resilience in the face of adversity, whether from front-line workers, families caring for each other, or being unable to care for or even see their sick relatives, to amazing acts of kindness and compassion. Acts of giving in this time make that resilience a little easier. In many ways, it brings out the best in us.”

In terms of philanthropy, these times have brought out the best in the entire country. According to “Giving USA 2021: The Annual Report on Philanthropy in America,” a record \$471 billion was donated to charities in 2020. That’s an increase of more than 5% over the previous year.

The fact that the growth took place during an economic downturn is especially remarkable. The pandemic as well as the racial justice protests of 2020 are credited with the uptick in contributions from individuals, foundations, corporations and bequests. The biggest surge in giving in 2020 came from foundations, many of which adapted to meet the needs of grantees during the pandemic. A prime local example is the Jewish Community Foundation of Los Angeles. The organization fully pivoted its institutional grantmaking to focus exclusively on addressing need from the pandemic. In September, the Foundation announced the award of \$3.7 million in grants to 45 local institutions, including 22 nonprofits and 23 synagogues for pandemic relief and recovery.

“Of the \$3.7 million in Reimagine Grants, about \$1 million of that total was awarded to 23 synagogues, including numerous in Beverly Hills and on the Los Angeles westside. The trauma and the toll that the pandemic has taken on synagogue staff has been tremendous. You could call it an invisible impact of COVID. By taking care of the people who lead the synagogues, we’re taking care of the people who go to those synagogues,” Naomi Strongin, Vice President of the Center for Designed Philanthropy at the Jewish Community Foundation of Los Angeles, told the Courier.

The “Giving USA” report does cite a bit of less positive news. It lists a few categories of nonprofits that have experienced an overall decline in giving. Sadly, one such category is arts and culture. That should not bode well in a city filled with creative giants, such as Beverly Hills.

“We value giving back, civility and love. It is sacred to the core of who we are. The more we give, the better we feel. This is us.” - Vice Mayor Lili Bosse

Councilmember John Mirisch expressed his feelings on the topic to the Courier. “These continue to be tough times, and not everyone is in a position to support charitable organizations. But for those who are, there are so many worthy causes to choose from. Especially in tough times, we need arts and culture more than ever, and I hope people would consider supporting cultural institutions,” said Mirisch.

As we approach the second holiday season of the pandemic, life does appear to be returning back close to normal. Though, we all realize it may never be quite the same. For one thing, the grand-scale charity events and galas that Beverly Hills was known for have yet to come back. Still, the spirit of giving lives on, albeit in different ways.

“Since the pandemic, we have been forced to reevaluate what is important and ways to extend resources to those in need. The true essence of a resilient human spirit is that we shall thrive again, and we will move forward,” Beverly Hills City Clerk Huma Ahmed told the Courier.

“We are amazingly fortunate,” added Gold. “We live in a place which much of the world cannot even imagine. Sometimes we get lost in the aggravation of the moment, but it is important to step back and regain that perspective. Philanthropy is not a seasonal event. It should be a continuous understanding that the world around us is not so fortunate as we are and offers a continuous opportunity, within each of our own means, to help those who need that help.”

Worthy causes surround us this time of year. But the maxim that charity begins at home is also true, and it is one in which Beverly Hills excels.

“The human spirit is ultimately good, kind, loving and generous,” Vice Mayor Lili Bosse told the Courier. “Beverly Hills, although world famous and iconic throughout the world, is truly a loving, open-hearted community that feels like family. We have all been through a very challenging time, but I know with all my heart and soul that our connection to goodness and caring for one another is stronger than ever. We value giving back, civility and love. It is sacred to the core of who we are. The more we give, the better we feel. This is us.”



MAYOR ROBERT WUNDERLICH



VICE MAYOR LILI BOSSE



COUNCILMEMBER JOHN MIRISCH

The Courier reached out to community leaders in Beverly Hills to ask about charities they personally support during the holidays. To no one's surprise, their responses were far-reaching and impressive in their thoughtfulness.

Mayor Robert Wunderlich:

"Andrea and I have adopted the Shalom Institute, home of Camp JCA Shalom, as our primary organization to support. We also support a variety of organizations, but we feel that we can have greater impact by focusing on a smaller organization whose mission we enthusiastically endorse and where our efforts make more of a difference.

The Shalom Institute operates Camp JCA Shalom, a Jewish summer camp; Shemesh Farms, an organic farm providing meaningful employment and community for adults with diverse abilities and special needs; environmental educational programs; adult and family retreats; and other community activities.

The current need to support the Shalom Institute is great due to the back-to-back impacts of the Woolsey Fire, which destroyed the entire Camp facility in Malibu in November 2018, followed by the COVID pandemic. Our two children were enthusiastic campers and staffers at the Camp. We saw the enormous impact that the inclusiveness of the Camp had on them and want to make that magical experience available to others as well since Camp is an unaffordable luxury for many families. We strongly embrace the full vision of the Institute, developing community, inclusiveness, and environmental sustainability."

Vice Mayor Lili Bosse:

"The Maple Counseling Center and Beverly Hills Education Foundation (BHEF). As a Past President of BHEF and a proud alumnus of our Beverly Hills schools, BHEF is part of the essence of my being. Our Beverly Hills schools helped shape me into the person I am. Our kids are the foundation to our beautiful future of our beloved city. I will forever be grateful for the education I received by our amazing school district and vow to always pay it forward," said Bosse.

On the Maple Counseling Center: "These last few years have been so deeply challenging for all of us. I am so grateful to this beloved organization for providing a place for the community to nurture our heart, mind and soul. A safe space to build strength and insight into our mental health and provide life tools for hope and wellness."

Councilmember John Mirisch:

"Our own Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts is deserving of all the support it can get, as are two wonderful institutions in neighboring Los Angeles, the LA Philharmonic and LA Opera. Less well-known in Southern California is the New York-based Teatro Nuovo, which redefines the operatic experience for lovers of bel canto.

The California State Summer School for the Arts, held each summer at CalArts, is a wonderful program to allow our youth to develop and hone their creative talents.

I'd strongly recommend support of two nonprofits that focus on health: ASH - Action on Smoking and Health, whose Board I am privileged to serve on, and whose goal is to build a world with zero tobacco-related deaths. The UCLA Goldberg Migraine Program, started by my parents Wendy and Leonard Goldberg, is a valiant and groundbreaking attempt to find treatments and cures for a debilitating illness that impacts so many, but for which there has been so little relief over the years."

Councilmember Julian Gold, M.D.:

"First, we like to support organizations the subject of which have touched us personally, whether medical research for diseases our family has experienced or social causes which we feel are important. Secondly, we like to support organizations which support our community, not just Beverly Hills, but the community which surrounds us. This includes our city services, our religious institutions and social service organizations."

City Clerk Huma Ahmed:

"While there are many truly wonderful charities, my particular two favorites are the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank and the Maple Counseling Center. There are many families within our region who have serious food insecurities, which have been intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. I have observed entire families struggle with sudden loss of income and/or resources. This one is special to me because no one should go hungry if we all do our part and pitch in.

Mental health groups also need a special shout out. They are dealing with an unprecedented environment with people suffering from minor to serious mental health issues. It has become increasingly difficult in the current climate because mental health impacts all ages and demographics. You just don't know what someone is going through until you walk in their shoes."

Councilmember Lester Friedman:

"The holiday season is not only a time to gather and celebrate with family but also a time to remember those not as fortunate as ourselves. Simone and I support the children at Hope Street Family Center in downtown Los Angeles. Hope Street provides prevention and no-cost early intervention services for low-income young families with the mission of educating children and strengthening families in the underserved downtown area of Los Angeles. Children are our future and educating and building strong family relationships provide a path to those disadvantaged by poverty and a lack of educational opportunities," said Friedman.



COUNCILMEMBER JULIAN GOLD, M.D.



CITY CLERK HUMA AHMED



COUNCILMEMBER LESTER FRIEDMAN