

Local resident Crouse helps annual Flower Run event blossom

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Courtesy of Joy Erf

Children distribute flowers to runners participating in last year's Flower Run.

When Debbie Crouse's children were growing up, the Los Altos resident sought ways to give back to her community. One way was joining Child Advocates of Silicon Valley, which supports children in the foster-care system.

In an effort to raise money for the nonprofit agency, Crouse is helping organize the second Flower Run, a 5K run/walk scheduled 9 a.m. May 12 beginning at Los Altos Hills Town Hall.

"I just decided that I wanted to do something within the community," said Crouse, now a Child Advocates board member. "I used to volunteer with the homeless shelter before I moved to Los Altos. I was attracted to the idea of helping children who don't have the benefits mine ended up having – that's why I'm involved with the organization."

Child Advocates helps children navigate the foster-care system by matching them with an adult who acts as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) and represents the children in court. The Milpitas-based organization's goal is "to provide stability and hope to children who have experienced abuse and neglect by being a powerful voice in their lives," according to the Child Advocates website.

"We have a goal to serve every foster child in Santa Clara County," Crouse said. "We are trying to reach 900 in 2018 and 1,200 in the next three years."

Crouse noted that she is continually inspired by the success stories of those who go through the program.

"The foster youth (story) that always sticks with me is the one about a young man whose social worker implied that he wasn't really going to be a good match for having a CASA," she said.

“Child Advocates matched him anyway and, with the help of his CASA, he ended up graduating from high school and going to UC Berkeley.”

RAISING AWARENESS

The organization raises most of its money by holding community events – like the Flower Run – and through donations from individuals, foundations and corporations, according to its website. Crouse helped plan the inaugural Flower Run, held in downtown Los Altos last spring. Like that event, she hopes this year’s run not only raises money for Child Advocates. but also raises awareness of the agency.

“The big goal is to get a broader understanding that we’re out there and that Child Advocates makes a real difference in the lives of children in foster care,” Crouse said. “I feel like a fun run is really accessible. You pay \$30, you get to go and run or walk and enjoy the refreshments afterwards, all while learning about Child Advocates.”

She added that last year’s Flower Run raised just under \$5,000 with 120 registrations. This year, Crouse and fellow organizers Joy Erf and Grace Zakaria hope to reach \$7,500 and 200 registrations. Crouse said they have recruited several local businesses as sponsors.

A raffle will follow the run; last year’s prize items were donated by local merchants. Snacks will be provided to participants, and prizes will be awarded to the oldest runner and the top male and female finishers.

The 5K starts in front of Los Altos Hills Town Hall on Fremont Road and goes as far as VMware on Arastradero Road in Palo Alto before looping back to town hall. Participants are encouraged to dress in fun costumes, and finishers will be handed a flower.

“May is Foster Care Awareness Month, and May is spring with flowers blooming. We thought that flowers were symbolic of spring and growth,” Crouse said.

She said her favorite part of last year’s event was how intrigued the participants were with Child Advocates’ mission.

“I loved that everybody stayed, and they were interested in Child Advocates,” Crouse said. “The participants were genuinely interested in learning about Child Advocates, and they stayed and hung out with us for a while.”

Crouse hopes to expand the event in coming years. She mentioned VMware’s grounds as a possible site for next year’s Flower Run and has visions of one day hosting the event at Levi’s Stadium in Santa Clara.

Child Advocates has scheduled several other fundraisers this year, including a Wine, Women & Shoes event set for Sept. 30.

To register for the Flower Run (\$30), visit run4fosterkids.com.

For more information on Child Advocates, visit bemyadvocate.org.

