

Nonprofit sets down roots in West Palm Beach



For as long as she can remember, Ruth Tschudin always wanted to start a nonprofit organization.

That lifelong ambition can be traced to Tschudin's mother, who always told her three children she wished she could've helped people in need more often.

"They never had much money," Tschudin said quietly one recent afternoon in her West Palm Beach condo. "They were always borrowing from Peter to pay Paul."

Still, Tschudin's parents were always giving back, whether it was donating money to charities, teaching bible school or volunteering in the community.

The idea of helping those who were less fortunate never left Tschudin. When her

mother passed away in 1999 at age 88, Tschudin, a New Jersey native who was teaching third grade, knew the time had finally come to turn her dream into a reality.

Open Doors was started in New Jersey in memory of Tschudin's mother, Grace. In fact, the full name of the group, which opened in 1999, is Open Doors, an Amazing Grace Foundation.

"This," Tschudin said, "would've made my mom very happy."

The name was carefully considered, with Tschudin, 69, wanting it to convey hope and new beginnings. "I wanted to have a feeling that we are opening new doors for people and giving them opportunities that they otherwise wouldn't have," Tschudin said.

The first thing Tschudin did was start a program called New Horizons, which provided temporary low-cost housing for individuals and families in need. For more than a decade, Tschudin rented out her mother's old New Jersey condo for only \$500 a month to various individuals, including an abused single mother and a man suffering from Lou Gehrig's disease.

But Hugo, Tschudin's husband for 46 years, said Open Doors didn't just give people a place to stay.

"We also give people lots of encouragement," he said. "These are people who were mostly isolated and didn't have any close relatives."

Open Doors is also a huge supporter of animal rescue organizations and has donated around \$15,000 to various organizations over the years, including recently to Peggy Adams Animal Rescue League and Big Dog Ranch Rescue. Much of that money was raised during Dogfest, an annual event Open Doors held in New Jersey. The organization has also donated money to the Salvation Army and World Vision.

But after 12 years of running Open Doors in The Garden State, the Tschudins last September moved to West Palm Beach to be closer to their daughter and 3-year-old granddaughter who live in Royal Palm Beach. Their organization, of course, came with them.

"We were getting to the age where we couldn't afford the big house anymore, so we sold it and invested the money," Tschudin said.

Immediately after moving to Palm Beach County, Tschudin started three new initiatives — a Bible read-through course, a grant program and a six-session storyteller’s walk through the Bible.

Since Tschudin is relatively new to Florida, she said she’s still getting familiar with the area and figuring out which local organizations Open Doors will support.

“This is going to take some time,” Tschudin said. “We have to learn the needs down here.”

In the meantime, however, Tschudin said she would like Open Doors to continue its mission.

Tschudin said working with her Swiss husband, who worked in international marketing and management, prepared her for the financial rigors of operating a nonprofit.

“I started out writing a few checks and before I knew it, I was vice president of finance,” Tschudin said, laughing. “That accounting work came in handy for this.”

Whenever Tschudin is working on Open Doors, which is basically all the time, she can’t help but think of her parents — especially her mother.

“Part of this nonprofit is giving back for all we have been given,” she said. “This is a labor of love and a joy in my retirement. For me, helping people is like a hobby.”

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