

New Directions

Helping disabled travelers worldwide

By Zsuzsa Beres

Special to the Business Times

In 1985, social service professional Dee Duncan, a graduate of University of California, Santa Barbara, took her \$12,000 retirement fund savings, left her job, and opened an account to launch New Directions, a Goleta-based nonprofit travel agency providing affordable quality domestic and international tours for developmentally disabled people of all ages. At the time, Duncan told herself, "I will try to do this until the \$12,000 runs out." Sixteen years later, "I'm still here," she said.

The purpose of New Directions' programs is to promote the understanding, acceptance, and appreciation of people with disabilities as important and contributing members of the world. The group annually sponsors trips in the United States and abroad. Previous excursions have included Australia, New Zealand, Bahamas, Ireland, Italy, Hawaii, Washington, D.C., Japan, Israel, China, Disneyland, Las Vegas, and New York City.

"I worked at the Devereux Foundation, organizing trips for developmentally disabled people," said Duncan, currently New Direction's executive director. "There was more and more demand, and I wished that there were an organization that provided such services outside of Devereux, but there wasn't



Dee Duncan (front) with New Directions staff members (from left) Janet Kim, Sherri Habush, Jeanne Mohle, Elizabeth LeMoine, Colette Piancentini, and Theresa

anything."

Duncan said there were travel agents, but they did not have any idea how to take this particular population on trips. "I started, very, very small, in my studio apartment, and didn't know anything about business," she said. "I knew how to work with this population and I knew how to take them on trips. I knew this was possible and felt this should really be available."

Operating on an annual budget of \$700,000, New Directions' Goleta office is run today by a staff of two full-time workers, four part-time workers, and four paid developmentally disabled part-time workers. The organization has 120 on-call tour

guides and maintains a branch office in Los Angeles. Seventy-five percent of tour participants are from the Tri-Counties, and 90 percent are from California. Each year New Directions serves over 450 children, adults, and seniors who have developmental, emotional, medical, and physical disabilities such as mental retardation, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, autism, schizophrenia, blindness and hearing impairments.

Duncan said that travel for this population had benefits for people well beyond the travelers themselves. "It was important to have the general public find out the disabled are not that different from them, that they have the same needs and wants," she said. "If you're on a cruise ship to the Mexican Riviera and on the cruise you see a developmentally disabled person dancing, enjoying activities, going into the Jacuzzi and doing everything like everyone else, you begin to see who this person really is."

Parents of developmentally disabled children are especially active in New Directions. "My disabled 34-year-old son has been traveling with New Directions for 11 years. He enjoys bicycling and has been on tours to places like Orlando, Florida, British Columbia and Maui," said Board Member Sally Milano, the organization's secretary. "Traveling with New Directions gives my son the opportunity to do exactly what other bicyclists want to do."

Milano said that her son, like many others, got a chance to fly on an airplane and stay at nice hotels for the first time. "My son enjoys the bike tours and likes the staff's attitude. He enjoys that they do not try to teach them, but work with them on their own

level," Milano said.

Milano gives funds to New Directions programs. Her son also contributes. "He provides half the funding for his trips," she said. "Once a month he rides his bike to the New Directions office to make his payment. It is meaningful to him to contribute."

Some travelers are unhappy at first that there are people with developmental disabilities on their tours. "When we first land, people's reaction is just shock," said tour guide Victoria Rice, who is a registered nurse. "But when people see me struggling with a wheelchair on the curb they just rush to help. People do help."

Duncan's favorite program is the Holiday Happiness program. It is a family-style Christmas holiday for children and adults living in institutions, state hospitals, residential programs and group homes who cannot be with their families for the holidays.

The Rancho Santa Barbara Marriott at Buellton donates accommodation and gifts to Holiday Happiness. Tom Hagreen, general manager of the hotel, said, "We take in the travelers and provide accommodation for three nights. We welcome them with little gifts, provide dinner the first evening, a boxed breakfast the next morning, and a departure picture gathering in the lobby." Hagreen said both his staff and his family embrace the program, as does the hotel ownership. "It's something we'll be doing for a long time."

Serving the entire state of California, Holiday Happiness programs are offered in San Francisco, Santa Barbara, Anaheim and San Diego. The Marriott Hotels in each region provide complimentary rooms and suites.

"This travel is not a necessity, but allows people to have a broader experience of life, like we do. It is one of the basic pleasures of life," said board member Eric Onnen, CEO of Santa Barbara Airbus, a donor of travel services to New Directions.

"Philosophically what's really important is to see these folks in a nice hotel because they deserve it," Duncan said. "We want them to be doing these



Travelers with disabilities enjoy a trip to Australia, thanks to New Directions

quality activities, so that people see them in a different light."

The tour guides are special educational instructors, recreation therapists, residential counselors, nurses, nurses' aides, vocational and independent living skills counselors, and other professional staff who have been trained to work with people with developmental disabilities.

"I just enjoy all the trips. I like the cruises like the Delta Queen," said Sherri Habush, a part-time employee under New Directions' Integrated Work Program. "I have been to Australia, Japan, New Zealand, England and Ireland. Next I'm going on the Disney Cruise in August. I'm excited." Duncan said it used to be that the sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers of the developmentally disabled trav-

eled, but they were left behind. "Now, often they have traveled all over the world, more than their relatives."

"A Fijian woman who worked at our hotel said that here in Fiji we keep our people with disabilities in the house, we don't let them out on the street, we're ashamed of them," Rice said. "She said it's been so incredible for us to see your group and how wonderful everyone is. We need to make a change, we need to let people out of the house, and we need to stop being ashamed of them."

Information on New Directions, how to volunteer, or make donations, can be obtained by calling (888) 967-2841.