Making the holidays a bit brighter

New Beginnings partners with Banana Republic, Gap to provide gifts to families and veterans

By MITCHELL WHITE
NEWS-PRESS ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Local nonprofit New Beginnings had the good fortune of expanding its annual “Adopt-a-Family” program this year. By doing so, the group was able to provide holiday gifts for families and formerly homeless veterans through its charitable initiative that channels the local retail sector to purchase gifts for those in need.

The second annual event featured gifts for three families and four veterans who reside in New Beginnings’ Johnson Court, its 18-unit housing complex that opened in February 2020 in Santa Barbara. The retailers included in this year’s efforts were local employees from Banana Republic and Gap, as well as Sally Brothers Soap Company, and Skechers. Community members also assisted in the event.

Through the partnership, New Beginnings has helped to ensure that parents who are struggling financially are still able to provide holiday gifts to their children. “This was an opportunity to give people some gifts that they wouldn’t have had the opportunity to get or give themselves,” said director for New Beginnings. Dr. Laura Kurta, head president for New Beginnings and registered therapist told the News-Press.

“The families and veterans were selected following consultation with the New Beginnings program staff, who were asked to identify families who were in need of holiday gifts because of struggling financially due to the pandemic,” the statement added. “The families included three families and two children and a veteran and his son. Most of the children are under the age of 15, and Michael Berton, development director for New Beginnings, said it was perfect for us to do this round around the holidays,” said Dr. Kurta. Our clients were very appreciative and it really changed their perspective. They could focus on having a good holiday despite all the other challenges. “It was really rewarding, and what was more powerful than the gifts was seeing how people care.”

Dr. Kurta explained that many events that New Beginnings would typically host around the holidays have been canceled due to the recent surge in COVID-19 cases. The nonprofit conducted meal distributions in the spring and summer but they have since been canceled in recent weeks. Dr. Kurta has been involved with New Beginnings for eight years, serving as a board member for six. She took the role of board president in January 2020 alongside Kristine Schmidt, executive director of the nonprofit. The two attended Antich College together.

“This organization serves our community in so many ways, including segments of the population that don’t always get served,” she explained. “It’s a combination of homeless services and counseling services to provide free counseling services. We’ve been offering free counseling services...

Please see GIFTS ON A6

Representatives from Gap pose with gifts that were donated to families in need.

By GRAYCE MCCORMICK
NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

Throughout 2020, many scientific breakthroughs were made, but a lot of important research and discoveries were achieved regarding Santa Barbara’s perhaps most treasured asset: the ocean.

On July 22, a study was published showing that sharks are almost completely absent from reefs in several nations, meaning there’s a decline in the reef shark population. Dr. Jane Caudle, a research biologist at the UCSB Marine Science Institute, was one of the lead authors on the study.

“Sharks are an indicator of healthy oceans, so their decline is quite concerning,” Dr. Caudle explained. “This is an opportunity to learn more about the shark population and how it’s changing over time.”

The study was published in the journal “Science” and is the first of its kind to examine the global impact of COVID-19 on the ocean.
RENZ, Wesley James
Wesley James Renz, 89, of Santa Barbara, passed away peacefully in his sleep on October 31, 2020, at Casa Convento in Santa Barbara, CA. He was born to John Calvin Renz and Cecelia L. (nee Niederehr) Renz on December 16, 1930, in Bakersfield, CA. Wes grew up in Bakersfield and Watsonville and attended secondary school in Santa Cruz, CA.

Upon returning to Bakersfield, he pursued an electrical engineering degree at the University of Texas at Austin and then worked for various companies throughout southern California. He later joined the Kern County Water Bank, where he became a program manager and eventually the Director of Operations. He retired after 45 years of service.

Wes was an active volunteer in the Santa Barbara area, particularly with the Bakersfield Heart Association and the Kern County Water Bank. He enjoyed spending time with his family and friends, and was an avid outdoorsman who loved hiking, camping, and fly fishing.

He is survived by his wife, Labonne (nee Mathis) Renz; his daughters, Debbie Renz Bayer, and Jodi Renz; his son, Dennis Anderson, and his grandchildren, Cassandra, Hans, and Casey. He is also survived by his brother, George and his sister, Ruth Niederehr.

The family would like to thank the caregivers from the Comprehensive Care Center of Santa Barbara for their care and support. A private scattering of ashes will be held in the near future.

The family requests that donations be made in Wes's memory to the Comprehensive Care Center of Santa Barbara.

SMITH, Howard
Howard Smith, 93, of Santa Barbara, passed away unexpectedly on Friday, September 25, 2020, in Los Angeles, CA. He was born on October 15, 1926, in Chicago, Illinois, to Elbert and Etta Smith. He is survived by his wife of 68 years, Barbara (nee Perry); his daughters, Susan Perry and Mary Parks; his grandchildren, Kari Smith, Erika Smith, and Glynis Smith; his great-grandchildren, Skyler and Scarlett Smith; his brother, John (Jody) Smith; and his sister, Betty (Judy) Van Egie.

Howard was a devoted husband, father, and grandfather. He enjoyed spending time with his family and loved cooking, gardening, and playing golf. He was an avid fan of the Chicago Cubs and the Chicago White Sox.

A Celebration of Life will be held at a later date. The family requests that donations be made in Howard's memory to the American Diabetes Association or the American Cancer Society.

McCOLM, Barbara Mary
Barbara Mary McColm, 93, passed away peacefully in her sleep on October 11, 2020, at her home in Emeraude Court, Santa Barbara, CA. She was born on January 1, 1927, in New York City, to Ruby (nee Davis) and Cedric McColm.

Barbara was a retired writer and editor who enjoyed traveling and exploring the world. She was an avid reader and loved spending time with her family and friends. She is survived by her son, Stephen McColm; her daughter, Jennifer McColm; and her grandchildren, Lila McColm and Ben McColm.

A private scattering of ashes will be held in the near future. The family requests that donations be made in Barbara's memory to the American Cancer Society or the Alzheimer's Association.

One of the recipients of this year's Adopt-a-Family program was a single mother of two, who was provided gifts for her children.

It was just so wonderful to witness their joy, she said.