
The saying goes, if you want something done right, ask a busy person to do it. No truer words were ever spoken when it comes to the **IT GIRLS**.



the
IT
GIRLS
take on
Las Vegas

The **IT GIRLS** are a dedicated, hard working, passionate group of women who have made it their lives' purpose to not only educate the Las Vegas community about the needs of the intellectually disabled, but also to join the healthy and the challenged in a purposeful journey.

BY CINDI R. MACIOLEK

IT refers to the action "IT matters" of helping people with intellectual disabilities to become more socially accepted and integrated into the community. To all the members of the group, IT matters.

The **IT GIRLS** work in conjunction with Opportunity Village (OV), one of the valley's most beloved charitable organizations. Opportunity Village is a not-for-profit organization that serves the intellectually disabled, called clients, by training them for employment and providing recreational activities. You'll find the results of their hard

work all around you. For example, they offer document shredding services, train baggers for your grocery store and put together Harrah's coffee condiment packets for hotel guests. And, those of you who were around when the King performed, OV was the official manufacturer of Elvis's signature white scarves.

Founded just about a year ago, the **IT GIRLS** have already made a major impact. If you suited up in red and white for last year's Las Vegas Great Santa Run, then you no doubt encountered one of the **IT GIRLS** in the process.

IT Girls (pictured from left to right) Tory Cooper, Donna Hash, Chris Richards, Amy Preus, Joan Hammer, Sasha Jackowich and Mary Thomas participated in the Las Vegas Great Santa Run last December, which has become the group's signature event. >>



"We don't just mother our own children. We mother the people our hearts are open to."



IT Girl Karen Godfrey models fashions from Escada at the 2008 Celebrity Poker Tournament held in February at Caesars Palace.



^ Opportunity Village founder Linda Smith (second from left) is pictured with a few of the IT Girls.



<<Terri Peck, Chris Richards and Joan Hammer are just three of the IT Girls that advocate on behalf of the clients of Opportunity Village.

"The IT GIRLS embraced it as their own, and made a quick difference right away," said Linda Smith, chief development officer for Opportunity Village. "It's a big project, but they wanted their own signature event. Each year they plan to grow the number of participants, both locally and worldwide, and constantly challenge the Guinness Book of World Records for the largest registered gathering of Santas at a single event. It's great for Opportunity Village, it's great for Las Vegas, and it's great for those with special needs who benefit from the positive press the event draws."

A driving force behind the growth of Opportunity Village for over 25 years, Smith first conceived of the IT GIRLS several years ago, but set about making it happen in earnest in 2007. "I wanted to get dynamic, accomplished women who could help change people's perceptions of people with disabilities in the community," said Smith. "I wanted women who would tell their stories of the connections they've made. I also was looking to the future, to find the next generation of women who could carry on my vision, carry the torch as I get older." Smith's own son, Chris, was born with Down Syndrome. Now 32 years old, Chris works at OV as a document shredding specialist.

Heading up the diverse group of women are co-chairs Joan Hammer and Terri Peck. Hammer has been a volunteer at OV for over 17 years, often donating 30-40 hours a week. "OV is part of my heart and soul. I was very blessed that I didn't have to work, but I wanted to give my time to a worthwhile cause," said Hammer. "Every day that I'm working with OV, I leave with a smile on my face. The work is so rewarding; I've learned what it is to give and have a heart." She's invited kids over for Christmas, taken them to the hairdresser and to the movies, among other things.

Peck started volunteering at OV about five years ago, when she first came to town. Her nine-year-old daughter, Madi, is a future OV client, and she "wants to make sure that OV is still around when Madi gets older," said Peck. "I know that Madi has a future here, because OV doesn't see disabilities, they only see possibilities in their clients. The IT GIRLS are an extension of that, so loving and caring. They are a bundle of energy and proudly wear their titles."

The meetings begin with a toast, but let it be known that this is not a social organization. "Sure, a lot of us have become friends, but this is a roll-up-your-sleeves group that gets things done," said Peck. "Don't join expecting to just have fun. We need your time, effort, ideas and connections to make this group successful."

In addition to Smith, Hammer and Peck, Chris Richards rounds out the executive committee. Richards serves as the group's secretary. A vivacious thunderbolt, just like the other members, Richards keeps everyone informed and on track with their projects. "It's amazing what a small group of hard working women can accomplish," said Richards. "We eventually want to build a template of community involvement for the intellectually disabled that we can take worldwide. This is a start to help the Las Vegas community, but it's also a means to help on a larger scale."

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THE IT GIRLS

A group shot of the IT Girls taken before the Las Vegas Great Santa Run last year.



IT GIRLS include an event planner, single moms, a local television news anchor, and others covering a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Surprisingly, only a handful of the current 35 members are moms to special needs children.

Tory Cooper has two very healthy children, and a full-time career. She joined the IT GIRLS because she wanted to participate in an organization that made a difference in the community. "I was raised with the belief that the more you give, the more you receive," said Cooper. "I want to give of my talents and services, and the energy of this group can't help but be contagious. I also want my kids to be leaders in the community when they get older, so I'm involving them with the IT KIDS. They're the youngest members, and it will be their first time to experience someone with intellectual disabilities."

IT KIDS is a subgroup of the IT GIRLS, with the main purpose of connecting healthy and special needs kids between the ages of five and 18 to create friendships. "Children with disabilities often don't have a social life once they get home from school," said Melinda Brown who chairs the IT KIDS committee. Brown has an 18-year-old daughter, Sarah, who is a special needs child. "An intellectual disability can result in a very isolating life. People with disabilities are often misunderstood and make others feel uncomfortable. One of the most important things to learn is not to be afraid. Through IT KIDS, we want to start that learning process at an early age. We want to teach them at a young age not to be afraid of people who are different."

The IT KIDS plan to host a monthly social event. The first was a "sundae" afternoon in the park in early April, followed by a pajama party on April 30th. Future events include a bowling social, a back-to-school barbecue, and a Halloween party. IT KIDS eventually wants to develop a program whereby some of the older participants can travel to schools in the Las Vegas Valley, to share their experiences and spread the word of support and compassion for special needs children.

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THEITGIRLS

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Another goal for IT KIDS is the development of a buddy program. Several options are on the table but the project is still a work in progress. The goal is to create a volunteer driven organization in Las Vegas where kids and adults in the community become life long friends with individuals with disabilities. This is a program that they hope will be replicated worldwide. "As always, a smile is best shared with a friend," said Smith.

So, how exactly does one become a member of the IT GIRLS? First of all, you have to make a commitment to get in there and get the work done. You must also volunteer at least 100 hours for the year. IT GIRLS have joined because they know other members; some are sought out because they are leaders in other fields; still others have contacted OV wanting to volunteer, and found their way to this special group. In addition, IT GIRLS has a small monthly membership fee to finance their needs for posters, mailings and so on. To find out more information, you can follow the link from the OV website, www.opportunityvillage.org, or go directly to the IT GIRLS website at www.ItGirlsItMatters.org.

If you can feel the love and energy and you want to help, but you just don't have that amount of time to devote, the IT GIRLS have created a special group just for you. The Friends of the IT GIRLS is set up for ladies who want to make a difference and are able to contribute when they are called upon but are limited with their time. "We understand that it's difficult to have a full-time job, raise a family and volunteer and we don't want to shut the door to anyone who wants to help OV," Peck explained, "but you have to be committed even as a Friend."

The IT GIRLS are already hard at work planning this year's Santa Run, slated for December 6, 2008. It takes place the day before the Zappos.com Las Vegas Marathon, and just after the start of National Finals Rodeo. The group is hoping to wrangle more than a few cowboys to join in the fun.

In addition to the annual Santa Run, big plans are in place to celebrate Opportunity Village's 55th anniversary in 2009. IT GIRLS are hoping to make it the party of the year.

The impact of the IT GIRLS is evident in the hearts of those mothers who know the struggle of having an intellectually disabled child. "A mother will always go to bat for her child, but it's overwhelming to see someone else working just as hard as you," said Brown. "We don't just mother our own children. We mother the people our hearts are open to." □

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