

Volunteer Organization Born a Century Ago Looks to the Future

By Rachel Parker

We think of our nation as founded by men of will and determination. When it comes to healthcare for children in the East Bay, we can thank strong-willed mothers and sisters who launched Children's Hospital and then sustained it with relentless fundraising and volunteer hours.

In 1912, the Baby Hospital of Alameda County – now known as UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland -- was opened in the former home of the McElrath family on the border of Oakland and Berkeley. The brainchild of Bertha Wright, a visiting nurse in Alameda County, the Baby Hospital grew from a good idea to an institution almost overnight, thanks in large part to broad support from women of the East Bay who sponsored the project. Two years later, the Branches were formed. Modeled on the “Twigs” of community support for a New York hospital, the Branches organized volunteers who put together a variety of fundraising and philanthropic efforts – from country fairs to asking for beds and equipment for the new hospital. The all-female corps of volunteers hailed from across the East Bay, united by their support for a fledgling yet important resource. While several of the branches formed in 1914 have ceased to exist, Hill Branch, with membership from throughout the East Bay, has been in continuous operation and is looking forward, embracing new ways of reaching the community of supporters.

Always been about the kids: The women who formed the early Hill Branch came from across the East Bay, but shared a sense of social responsibility and, as women, cared for babies and young children. Their original organizing documents stress that the Baby Hospital of Alameda County was to care for “sick babies without regard to creed, nationality, or race.” But, running a hospital is an expensive proposition, and in its first year, the hospital served more than 6000 patients – and ran a deficit of \$1,200 per month. The need was great, but so were the costs.

The branches' fundraising enterprises started with a fair with a country store theme. Each branch offered items for sale, such as jams, aprons, or dolls. The early Hill Branch members sold “boudoir goods” at their table – hot water bottle covers and nightcaps. Raising money was not enough; the branches established a set of rules for members so that money would not be spent on branch operations needlessly. Somehow, the deficit was made up, and the Baby Hospital stayed open.

In 1958, Hill Branch again followed an East Coast model and started the Winter Ball, a black-tie debutante ball that raises money for the hospital through ticket sales and participant fees. During the bleak winter months, while most high school seniors are waiting to hear from colleges, Hill Branch asks young women and their families to put

aside that anxious feeling for a bit, to focus on the coming December and the opportunity to celebrate the launch of these young adults while raising money for Children's.

“These girls have made choices – from deciding to take AP US History to going out for crew team, to deciding which college is the best fit for them,” says Sally Mehaffey, a long-time Hill Branch member and this year's ball co-chair. “Each of those choices has made a difference and enabled her to embark on her adult life. At the same time, each family is making a substantial commitment to Children's Hospital. We are proud of that.”

In a 1960 article on fundraising, a branch officer said, “While the event is being sold, it is also of paramount importance to sell the Hospital and what it is doing for the children of the community. When this job is well done, resistance to ticket sales is negligible.”

Today's Winter Ball organizers are no less committed to the message that the event is to benefit a vital institution of the East Bay. From the January Information meeting, where doctors stress their gratitude for the funds provided through the ball, to special tours for participants and philanthropic gatherings, Hill Branch brings the message of the value of the hospital to a new generation each year.

Today's members: With 40-plus active members, and an equally large group of “associate members” who still offer time and financial support, Hill Branch is facing the 21st Century with eyes wide open. Members bring their expertise as accountants, business owners, marketing consultants, lawyers, and designers to find ways to support the hospital and minimize expenses.

“No matter what job you take on as a branch member, you will effect change,” says Joan Deuel, who joined a junior branch while in high school, then joined Hill Branch some 20 years ago. Deuel, who lives in Dublin, has worn all the hats during her time in Hill Branch, from Ball Chair to President of the branch. Today, she serves on the Branches Board, which annually approves the allocation of the \$1 million Branches gift to the hospital.

“Everyone takes full responsibility and credit for the decisions of what to fund,” Deuel says. “Everyone feels responsible for the choices we make.”

The Branches Board also serves as a critical communications conduit between the hospital administration and the volunteers. Deuel and her counterparts at the other branches report on changes at the hospital, and issues that the hospital is facing.

“The branches are a good entry point to supporting a community institution,” says Betsy Biern, Senior Vice President & Chief Development Officer of Children's Hospital & Research Center Foundation. “Members get to do something with their friends. And whether they learn more about the hospital through a tour or because they have taken their own child to the hospital, they build a deeper understanding of what the institution does.”

Many Hill Branch members join the branch because their child was treated at the hospital, and they saw first-hand the benefit of having equipment sized just for kids, and professionals who understand that babies cannot be told to do something “because it is good for you.” Others join because of a family legacy of support for Children’s.

It was the risk of losing the institution that brought Katherine Glaessner of Oakland to Hill Branch just a couple of years ago. “It would be a great tragedy if Children’s had to close or move due to lack of funding,” she says. Her daughter participated in the Winter Ball a few years ago, but even before that, Glaessner knew that the hospital was an institution that many in the Oakland area depended upon. “I wanted to do what I could to assure that Children’s stays in Oakland.”

Glaessner is not unique in her passion for the community resource. “I am constantly inspired by this group of accomplished, and busy, women who give so much of their time to the organization, and I am very proud of the work that we do,” says Pamela Stefan, an Orinda resident who is this year’s Hill Branch president. “I also appreciate the camaraderie and friendships that I’ve made through working together on Winter Ball.

Indeed, Deuel notes that some of her most enduring friendships have been made through participation in Hill Branch.

Reaching beyond the inner circle. Hill Branch’s only fundraising activity today is the Winter Ball, an elegant evening celebrating the young people of the community without the distraction of an auction. The 500-guest event takes 10 months and hundreds of volunteer hours to organize. While actual proceeds depend on the number of participants and guests, the Winter Ball has brought in more than \$1 million since its 50th Anniversary in 2008. Organizers believe that the grand total of gifts to Children’s through the Winter Ball is nearly \$6 million. Because costs for the event consistently march upward, Branch leadership is considering ways to increase sponsorship and other community support, so that ticket prices and fees paid by debutante families can hold steady.

This year, 20 young women and their families from across the Bay Area are participating in the ball. As in years past, the participants attend colleges and universities from Los Angeles to Boston, and are studying everything from international relations to art and engineering. While these debutantes will wear white dresses and gloves as the original debs did in 1958, the modern Winter Ball is not about exclusivity or social status. Instead Ball organizers emphasize the opportunity for families to celebrate the “launch” of these young women while raising money for the hospital.

"These young women have exciting careers ahead as prosecutors, technology entrepreneurs, diplomats, and environmental activists," said Kate Faust, a long-time Hill Branch member from Piedmont. Currently, she is serving as marketing chair. “What brings them together is a commitment to the hospital, not a social register,” she adds.

“Hill Branch has a unique program, and we would like to invite young women to start to think about and create a more serious focus on how philanthropy will play a role in their

lives,” says Biern. “We hope the new debutante classes will get to know us for a lifetime and see that they have an impact.”

And while the event is clearly not for everyone, Dr. Barbara Stagers head of Children’s mental health clinic, wishes it were. Young people, she says each year at the information session for prospective participants, need to be honored as they reach milestones. “Rites of passage” celebrations like the Winter Ball can help young adults feel successful and valued in their communities, she adds.

Being part of the Winter Ball is a twofer, she has said many times: Hill Branch organizes a beautiful celebration for local families, and the hospital gets the funds.

“It is all about the kids and the hospital,” says Faust.

Tweaking the formula. Traditions within Hill Branch and the Winter Ball are deep, yet, like your favorite holiday menu, traditions can be tweaked and formulas can be updated without losing the overall impression. Invitations to the Winter Ball are still addressed by hand, and formal attire is requested at the ball – just as it was in 1958. “Some traditions just add to the elegance, and everyone can enjoy them,” says Deuel.

However, new twists in keeping with today’s world such as an “after party” have been added to the Ball offerings, giving young people a time to dance and mingle after the formal ball has ended. Both members and participants focus much more on hands-on philanthropy than in days of old. Early Hill Branch members could not have foreseen use of e-mail or social media, but they would approve of their usage.

As Hill Branch is celebrating 100 years of service to UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospital Oakland, its many active, associate and past members are proud of Hill Branch’s long association with the East Bay. At the same time, Winter Ball guests, alumna, and their families can be proud of the support and awareness their participation has generated for the hospital during the past 56 years.

“We welcome families who would like to support Children’s through the Winter Ball,” says Faust. “We know participation in the Winter Ball is a great beginning step toward more involvement with our treasured community resource.”

Who wouldn’t want to follow in the footsteps of Bertha Wright and the other dedicated and inspiring women of the East Bay? It might even be worth a waltz lesson or two.

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How to spend \$50 million? Focus on the kids

Children's Hospital Oakland was at a difficult place a few years ago. Mandates from the state said that it had to bring its facility up to new earthquake safety standards, and local opposition kept it from going to the local market for bond funding. Huge expenses loomed, yet, with 70 percent of its patient base receiving Medi-Cal assistance, the hospital had no way of paying for the retrofit.

Thankfully for the children of the East Bay and their families, the UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital was looking for a partner – one that would improve its focus on children's services. Last year, UCSF Benioff gave Children's Hospital Oakland \$50 million – its largest single infusion of cash support ever, according to Betsy Biern, Senior Vice President & Chief Development Officer Children's Hospital & Research Center Foundation.

Use of the funds will be staged. In Phase 1, the hospital will build a second outpatient building that will be attached to the existing outpatient building. Across the street at the hospital, ground-level parking for emergency room visitors will be added. A new rehabilitation center will be added to the outpatient site, so that kids with crutches or wheel chairs can learn to handle curbs, sand, and bus stops. The pediatric and neonatal intensive care units will change from their current “ward” design to individual rooms, so that children and their families can have privacy, Biern said. In addition, there will be seismic improvements.

In Phase 2, the hospital will add more single rooms for patients, and build a second Family House. The expansion will allow the hospital to better define in-patient services versus out-patient services, as well. Perhaps most exciting for staff, the hospital will re-orient its entrance back to its original entrance, facing the lovely magnolia tree.

The hospital built by women has never forgotten its history. This return to its former entrance will remind visitors and staff alike what an amazing community institution Children's has been and will continue to be.

Hill Branch and Winter Ball Basics

If you would like more information about Hill Branch, Winter Ball, or UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland, please visit www.chohillbranch.com or send an e-mail to chohillbranch@gmail.com.