



Respect 90® Foundation Volunteer Spotlight

Says Joe Maddon: "The volunteers are the unsung heroes. Without them, none of our efforts occur." Every month, the Respect 90 Foundation will salute a distinguished volunteer from the communities of Tampa Bay, Chicago, Mesa, Arizona or Hazleton, Pennsylvania. Respect 90 will present a \$1,000 grant to that volunteer's charity. Should you have someone who is deserving, please let us know.



Debbie Middleton | Save the Family Foundation

Estimates say that Debbie Middleton has positively impacted the lives of more than 7,000 Mesa families and more than 14,000 children.

Here's how the 66-year old wife and mother of two does it.

If it's the first quarter of the year, you can find her helping Mesa's United Way's volunteer tax assistance program (VITA) where she prepares tax returns for low income families a couple of nights a week. ("I didn't have a background in it," she admits, "but the IRS has a great training program on their website!")

Once tax season ends, she becomes a key advisor in the United Way's community grant process listening intently as local agencies make their ask for funding.

And then there's the four-month stretch starting shortly after Labor Day when she is immersed in a 5-day-a-week labor of love with Mesa's Save the Family.

"I just feel that where there is a need, please ask me," she said.
"That is how I have always looked at things."

Born in Yuma and a life-long Arizona resident, Debbie moved to the Phoenix area from Tucson in 1979, where she met her husband, Brian. Eventually she left her position at Valley National Bank and welcomed a daughter into their world.

She started a family and at the same time a career of helping others. Twenty-seven years later she is going strong.

Along the way (although she would be the last person to bring it up), Middleton was named Mesa's Woman of the Year by the Mesa Citizen of the Year Association, established in 1935.

Middleton said her volunteerism essentially began through her affiliation with the Mahnah Club of the East Valley, a philanthropic women's group with a mission of helping children and families and roots in Mesa that extend back to 1954.

"It's been the biggest influence just in who that I am," she said.

"I joined Mahnah in 1992 and they had just started raising funds for Save the Family at that time," Middleton recalled.

Save the Family offers a variety of programs designed to empower Mesa area families to conquer homelessness and achieve life-long independence. Their goal is to end the damaging effects of family homelessness by improving their education and employment opportunities, accessing safe, permanent housing, and building family competencies.

While the agency is active 12 months a year, their signature piece is their Holiday Sponsorship Program where those interested can sponsor a family for Thanksgiving and the December holidays.

"The more we talked to the volunteer coordinator and some of the case managers at Save the Family we realized they were overwhelmed with all they had going on to prepare to help these families for the holidays," says Middleton. "They are at the beckon call of the clients when there are issues. It's very traumatic during the holidays. These families are homeless, they are having to get themselves back on their feet. The caseworkers are trying to get them emotionally stable at that time to be able learn to be more successful with the programs that are offered.

"The big motivation for me was simply what can we do to take the load off of the really important employees? As a volunteer what can we do to take that off? The idea would be for us to answer the phones for you, we will mail things out for you, that kind of stuff during this time.

"That's how it started, by simply saying, 'Let us help you.' We have the time, we can do this. We come in every day during that time period and sometimes we are here for an hour and sometimes we are here all day."

Debbie and other volunteers effectively evolved into conduits between the families and case managers and as she says "it just grew from there." It is the volunteers who ensure the connection between the families and sponsors is a good fit.

It started with 50 families back in 1994. This holiday season, Save the Family will serve some 700 families.

"With the number of families growing each year we're here a little longer maybe but it flows so well and takes the pressure off the employees doing their job," admits Middleton. "We really work at this. And it is a system that has worked well."

During her watch, the holiday sponsorship program has gone from paperwork to computers from word of mouth to websites.

"Save the Family," she says, "has been in my heart forever."

Says Save the Family Grants Manager Linda Snidecor: "Debbie is extremely humble regarding the impact she has had on our organization, the families we serve, and our community. She quietly works to ensure the Holiday Sponsorship Program is seamless for donors, agency staff, and the families served. We have estimated that her work on our Holiday Sponsorship Program has directly impacted the lives of more than 7,000 homeless and impoverished families in our community over the years she has led the program. This includes more than 14,000 children who would not have a Thanksgiving meal or a Christmas present without her quiet effort of support and her dedication to helping the less fortunate in our community."

The most rewarding part for Middleton are the success stories. "When we see the families graduate out of the system. You hear the successful stories and its exciting. You're thinking they are going to make it, they're going to be OK and the graduation ceremonies are so emotional."

Often times those ceremonies might be the only time Middleton meets the families.

"We are in the office coordinating things so most of the time, I'd say 90 percent of the time, I've never seen a face with a name," says Middleton.

Middleton's devotion to Save the Family hasn't stopped her from also assisting YMCA, Model Legislature, International Student Friendship Program at Central Christian Church, Mesa Unified School District, Mesa Symphony, Girl Scouts, Phoenix Zoo, St. Vincent de Paul Society, Mesa Country Club, Mesa United Way, Helen's Hope Chest and Save the Family Foundation of Arizona. And there are others.

"It's a big commitment," she admits. "It's five days a week. My husband knows it. My kids know it," she says of her husband, Brian, retired after 44 years in commercial banking and daughter Hallie, a local attorney and son, Paul who handles communications for his church in South Dakota.

"My husband used to joke with me 'Can you sign up to volunteer at home?' she says with a laugh. "I'm working on it.

Then turning serious she adds, "You just fit it in because it is something I love to do. I can be emotional over this but it's a calling that God has placed me in and I believe that 100 percent. A blessing."

- **Rick Vaughn** | Executive Director, Respect 90 Foundation

For more Information on Save The Family go to savethefamily.org. or call 480-898-9007.



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