

Enriching education primary goal for Redlands woman

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While the budgets cuts have hurt many programs across the Redlands Unified School District, Redlands Educational Partnership Co-President Cindy Calderón is hoping to relieve the pain through the funding of art, science, and technology programs. (ERIC TOM/Staff Photographer)

The sting of budget cuts for students in the Redlands Unified School District may not be so painful thanks to the dedication of people like Cindy Calderón.

Calderón is the co-president of the Redlands Educational Partnership Foundation along with Renee Kern. She said the purpose of the organization is to support the district's 20,000 students by funding art, science and technology programs.

Last week, Calderón presented more than \$20,000 worth of grants to teachers in RUSD to fund everything from transportation to band festivals to giving middle school science classes the technology to video conference with scientists across the globe.

Calderón said she would one day like to see education funded to the extent that foundations like REP are not necessary. Until then, she and REP will continue on with their mission of fundraising to enrich the lives and educational experience of students in RUSD.

How did you get involved?

A friend of mine was on the board of Redlands Educational Partnership and "recruited" me about 20 years ago. I was newly back to Redlands, and had recently had my first child, which gets you to thinking about education. I had been a teacher in "another life" (living in Los Angeles, in between jewelry careers), so REP was a good fit for me.

What is the mission of your work?

REP's purpose is exclusively educational and charitable. Officially, we secure and distribute

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financial contributions from individuals, corporations and foundations for the benefit of the public school students in the Redlands Unified School District.

Our focus is enrichment opportunities in the arts, and we also include science and technology. We undertook this mission starting in 1987 because budget cuts were removing arts programs from the curriculum.

The cutting hasn't stopped, unfortunately, so our mission becomes even more critical. We see the arts as integral to a quality education, not as an afterthought.

How is that mission carried out?

Our work takes shape in so many interesting ways: school gardens at every school that wants one, art enrichment that includes student-created art, live performance assemblies and refurbishing instruments so kids can be in the band, microscopes and lab supplies, classroom technology, the list goes on and on. There is something we fund that touches every student in every school in Redlands Unified School District. Amazing.

Is that mission successful?

Yes! REP has put \$1 million plus into enrichment opportunities over the years. The Teacher Grant program started with an award of \$400 and we now fund grants up to \$3,000 with a total of \$20,000 being awarded this year.

We have created a student art program that culminates with selected entries being printed as notecards (which, by the way, are for sale at the District Office and on our website with proceeds going back to REP.)

November 14 saw the debut of our first student based talent show, Redlands Unified's GOT TALENT, with an extraordinary level of professional quality student talent performing.

We rehab used instruments to make band and orchestra available to more students. The arts are alive in our school district and I like to think REP has been instrumental- no pun intended- in that.

We've recently set up an endowment program that will allow sustained giving to be a part of our mission. A lot of success stories made possible by the sheer dedication of REP volunteers.

What are the challenges?

Our organization was founded 23 years ago because of school budget cuts. I don't have to tell anyone about school budget cuts today! It is not OK that, as a society, we make it possible for a professional athlete or entertainer to make millions of dollars a year, but don't require our government to value education and all the elements that contribute to a true education, by supporting schools financially.

REP implemented a donation program, "REP TEN", asking each family to give only \$10 for each student they have in RUSD. If that happened, we would have over \$220,000 each year to put into our schools! We have yet to realize more than \$10,000.

The needs in our schools never subside, only escalate. For us as a local foundation, we need to be the destination for donation dollars.

What is in your future?

It's exciting, and true, to say that I don't know! I have been with this foundation for almost 20 years, and I have seen it grow and adapt when I thought we'd done all we could do. The dedication and vision of everyone involved fosters that innovation and change. It's thrilling.

If you had a magic wand, what would you make happen?

My magic wand would have REP go out of business! That would mean we had bridged the gap between saying education is a priority and funding education as a priority. Until then, my magic wand would have REP as the donation destination for giving on all levels.

We would have more corporate partners give at a level like Beaver Medical Group does to help fund our programs. Many nonprofit organizations serve a relatively small group; REP services over 20,000 school children every day! Is one of them yours? Think about it.

Another voice: Renee Kern, REP co-president

Cindy has been part of REP for at least 20 years, so she brings a lot of history and knowledge of REP and I think it really enhances the organization to have that kind of person on our board. She truly cares about the students and enhancing their education and I really believe the students have benefitted from her leadership. Cindy is definitely an asset to REP. She's a great leader.

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