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SFNet Members Respond to those in Need During COVID-19

Brian Resutek of Rosenthal & Rosenthal spoke to several SFNet members to highlight how they have stepped up to assist during this time of crisis.

BY BRIAN RESUTEK



■ **BRIAN RESUTEK**
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SFNet members have always been active in charitable efforts; however, as the coronavirus pandemic began sweeping across the globe, the traditional charitable playbook required a crisis section. NBA Hall of Famer Magic Johnson once said, “When you face a crisis, you know who your true friends are.” This quote resonates with many as cities, states and countries shut down almost overnight, resulting in a massive call for assistance across the globe, with little historical equivalents. Many SFNet members quickly recognized this atypical situation and promptly stepped up to assist those in need, efforts that have only continued to strengthen during the pandemic.

Commitment to charitable efforts has been in the DNA of Gerber Finance from the start. These efforts were further cemented a few years ago when founder Gerald Joseph and CEO Jennifer Palmer established the Gerber Finance Foundation to work towards ending childhood food insecurity, and Gerber Gives Back (Gerber’s employee volunteer program).

When COVID-19 hit the New York City area in March, it had an immediate impact on both the HOPE-Full Kids program of New Rochelle and North Shore Holiday House of Long Island that the Gerber Finance Foundation supports. Gussie Melendez, director of development at Gerber Finance, noted that, “With HOPE-Full Kids, we aim to ease the financial and emotional concern of school breaks by ensuring children have access to food.” When COVID struck, access to food became difficult and need exponentially increased. Thanks to the coordination of Gerber,

its donors and HOPE Community Services of New Rochelle, the HOPE- Full Kids Program held a distribution to provide breakfast and lunch for five additional days to support the community during the pandemic. Over 9,000 meals in April and May were provided to area students through the program.

Additionally, the North Shore Holiday House was unable run its yearly summer camp program for girls due to Covid-19. The Gerber Finance Foundation supported their initiative to send care packages of food to campers. When asked if the volunteer efforts of Gerber Gives Back had any unexpected impact, Melendez added, "Our volunteer initiatives have increased our already strong bonds between employees, which furthers our commitment to giving back. We are grateful to spend time together making an impact in our communities."

Charitable impact has global reach for US Capital Global. Managing partner of US Capital Global, Charles Towle, explained that charity efforts have always been fundamental to him. In fact, Charles and US Capital Global's CEO, Jeffrey Sweeney, met in India through charity work over 15 years ago, just prior to Charles joining the company. While based in San Francisco, US Capital Global has deep roots in India from a charitable standpoint, along with an office location. This has been helpful in navigating the Indian government's stringent lockdown regulations due to Covid-19.

Towle explained some key lockdown differences between the US and India: "The lockdown in India is very different to that in the U.S. The movement of citizens is strictly limited and closely policed in certain zones, which means you need expertise with your local ground team for your effort to work. Additionally, the only way to get resources to the villages and temples is to understand the government regulations and protocols."



Axiom's efforts have provided hundreds of meals to families

and pandemic period.

One example is the work Braj Bhumi Group has undertaken

Fortunately, through Braj Bhumi Group, an affiliated nonprofit organization that US Capital Global supports and advises, there is direct engagement with local grassroots organizations in India, which has allowed for meals and services to flow into these areas during the lockdown

in the rural town of Vrindavan, India by safely delivering daily meals during the pandemic, a life-saving service that might otherwise have gone neglected. Vrindavan is an ancient pilgrimage site that typically attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors and pilgrims each year; however, with India's sudden, draconian lockdown measures, the local economy has all but collapsed. This left the town's most



The CIT Acts of Caring Program benefited frontline workers and nonprofits across the U.S.

vulnerable residents, some 20,000 elderly widows, hungry and perhaps forgotten. Through its financial and frontline efforts, Braj Bhumi Group continues to feed tens of thousands of villagers, informal workers, families and mendicants in rural India with no plans of slowing down.

The speed in which the coronavirus moved into Florida accelerated Axiom Bank's pace with charitable efforts. Axiom quickly stepped up and donated \$10,000 towards two nonprofits committed to fighting hunger in Central Florida and Tampa Bay, a continuation of the bank's efforts that started two years ago. As marketing manager, Lindsay Detwiler, explained, "Axiom's efforts involve a three-part, phased approach that encompasses not only a financial contribution, but also incorporation with our retail and business client base with continued efforts throughout the year by our employees."

Axiom's work has helped deliver healthy, wholesome meals directly to the doorsteps of families through coordination with the nonprofit, Feeding the Children Everywhere. The nonprofit packages delivery-ready meals in boxes from their warehouse for overnight shipment via FedEx. This has been greatly beneficial with the importance of contact-free sourcing during the pandemic. Market executive Susan Maurer added that Axiom's participation in these programs is "more than just writing a check and walking away." Both Maurer and Detwiler agreed that, unlike previous market downturns that develop over time, COVID-19 happened extremely fast and needed urgent attention. Maurer noted, "Our management team immediately asked us where Axiom could help as the state began to shut down. We had already been committed to these two wonderful programs, so it was very beneficial for everyone to know that we are making an immediate impact." While the bank's efforts have provided hundreds of nutritious meals to families, especially to at-risk seniors confined to their homes during COVID-19, Axiom employees are most excited when the second and third phases are fully incorporated.

CIT adjusted its annual CIT Cares Month in June as a result of COVID-19 with a program called Acts of Caring, where employees completed over 5,000 volunteer hours benefitting frontline workers and numerous nonprofit organizations across the country. Through its Acts of Caring program, CIT invited customers to share the needs in their communities, and CIT is supporting ten customer-nominated projects with grants to local nonprofit organizations. CIT is also doubling its support towards one organization based on the results of an online poll



The Gerber Finance Foundation works towards ending childhood food insecurity.



US Capital Global has deep roots in India and has worked to deliver meals there during the pandemic.

While the pandemic does not appear to be short-lived, the efforts of SFNet members have a much longer lifespan. The continued support of SFNet members to these charitable organizations illustrates how important these true friendships have become as we move forward in defeating this pandemic. ▣

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open to the public for a two-week period in July. "Each summer the CIT team turns its time and talents to giving back, and we know the needs are even greater this year," said CIT chief marketing and communications officer Gina Proia. "The Acts of Caring program started as a way to simply and safely mobilize our team to do something good, from wherever they were."

While COVID-19 projects such as mask-making, frontline support, food packaging and assistance for seniors in isolation were top of mind for many of the employees completing Acts of Caring this year, non-COVID efforts continued from prior years. These included advancing financial education and cleaning up parks and beaches, to name a few.