Busy Days Are the Rule at the House

by Tamara Dalton
Development Director

When our program director, Sister Ruth, traveled to a remote region of Papua New Guinea this summer to work for a month at her Order’s outpost there, someone needed to fill in for her. As The Family Link’s new part-time Development Director, I seized the opportunity. My goal was not only to contribute in a more intimate way to the needs of guests facing critical illness or injury of a loved one, but also to get a sense of the day-to-day work of our guest house.

My surprises began at my orientation meeting with Ruth. I expected she would tell me where things were located, how to answer phones, food preparation, etc. But my little notepad soon evolved into a large full-sized notebook. Five pages later, I was in a state of surprise about all the details, and I began wondering just what I had gotten myself into!

I looked around for the huge staff necessary to pull this off, but quickly remembered there were just two other part-time staff members, plus our volunteers, to accomplish all of this: Simon Dinglasan, the administrative assistant who keeps the office running smoothly; Blanca Alfaro, who keeps the house spotless; and Janis Berwitt, the tireless volunteer who helps Ruth—and now me!—with cooking, shopping, mail and a hundred other chores.

As soon as I settled in, the first new guest was at the door. My education began then and didn’t stop for the next 30 days!

When guests enter The Family Link house there is always the same initial reaction. They set down their bags, take a look around, and heave a sigh of relief as if some part of their burden has already been lifted. Remarks about the beauty of the house come next as they experience the surprise of being in a home rather than the cold surroundings of a hotel or motel.

But the universal response that I came to always expect is their comments on the serenity they feel upon walking through the front door. I was struck by the constant flow of gratitude, from the moment they saw the room in which they could finally relax, to the information we provided that covered most of their questions. They seemed shocked to be offered meals, computer access and detailed directions to the hospital or hospice they needed to find.

Many of our visitors are already overwhelmed by arriving in the big city from a small town, never having navigated on municipal public transit. I realized just how disorienting this experience is as people suffer through the sometimes long travel to reach their loved one, with the added stress of not knowing their way nor what they will find when they get here—and, often, facing all this with very little money in their pockets. Many feel the need to ask and be reassured that although we suggest only a $30 donation per night, we turn no one away for inability to pay. The response of some guests makes it clear that their confidence in humanity been restored.

I immediately plunged into daily activities: guests arriving and departing, a constant flow of phone calls requesting reservations, housecleaning, the grocery shopping, the baking of goodies by Janis, helping people feel at home. Not to mention the trash, recycling, watering the garden, bill-paying, photocopying, faxing, record-keeping and inventory—all the tasks of running a house and a business rolled into one, with just a handful of people to do it!

I quickly realized how important and far-reaching our work is. Thanks and relief from the hospital social workers who call seeking lodging for visiting families is an everyday occurrence when we are able to take families who are often sleeping in chairs in patients’ rooms or the waiting areas. Thanks also come from a parent, aunt or uncle of young adult guests staying with us, from husbands and wives, from children whose mother or father has stayed with us.

Needless to say, my respect for the efforts of Sister Ruth and staff for all these years was tremendous, and I felt honored to substitute for a short time, since no one can truly replace her.

Looking over our records, I see how many people have expressed their gratitude for years...
Recession Worries

We See Red Ink Despite Belt-Tightening

As we are all well aware, these are proving to be very precarious times financially. Overall support for charitable organizations like The Family Link has suffered in 2008. Recognizing the challenges we face, The Family Link Board of Directors has been carefully monitoring the situation, while we dip into our modest savings to pay the monthly bills.

Many of you longtime friends recall that our founder and program director, Ruth Hall, has faced frightening fiscal threats before this. In the early 1990s, as the Board debated closing the agency, Ruth spoke with a sympathetic reporter whose resulting story brought a life-saving surge of donations.

Lessons learned in lean times have taught The Family Link how to minimize costs. Before our current 2008-2009 fiscal year began July 1, Ruth and Treasurer Bob Hayn crafted a bare-bones budget, category by category, limiting expenditures to basic operating necessities even before the scope of the current recession became apparent.

An example is maintenance of our 100+ year-old house: We will do only projects that are absolutely required for the continued health of our facility, until we are sure of our financial stability.

For the kitchen, Ruth has redoubled her habitual shopping acuity, seeking bargains, eschewing extras. A cheaper communications provider she found has trimmed our phone bill. Bob sought out a banker who cut our fees while increasing convenience for us.

Meanwhile, many of the generous donors we’ve always depended on are having troubles of their own. Some have sent apologetic notes with smaller gifts, or have had to curtail their gift-giving altogether.

We understand only too well. We can never overstate our appreciation for the generosity of those who support The Family Link.

Introducing Our Two New Staff Members

We welcomed two new part-time employees in 2008.

Tamara Dalton became our new Development Director after Richard Cardarelli resigned to devote more time to his growing duties with the Society of St. Francis. Tamara is responsible for fund-raising, communications and public relations, and also assists with guests.

Her background with small, community-oriented nonprofit organizations includes fund-raising and administration. Since coming to us in June, she has been developing an agency fund-raising plan; doing extensive foundation, corporate and individual grant and donation research; preparing and tracking funding requests; and initiating and maintaining liaison with grant-making organizations.

We are optimistic that Tamara’s knowledge and experience will enable us to diversify our funding base, reduce our dependence on economically stressed individual donors during this recession, and ensure financial stability for the future.

Simon Dinglasan joined us last January as Administrative Assistant, taking the office chair vacated by Jonathan Hicks. He provides direct support to Sister Ruth, Tamara, and members of the Board of Directors, as well as to our guests. Brother Simon is also a member of the Society of St. Francis.

His diverse responsibilities include maintaining our database, keeping financial records, making sure we meet government filing deadlines and requirements, and the many other daily tasks involved in running the business side of a nonprofit agency. When we need to find a fact or a number, Simon tracks it down. When we need more volunteers for a fundraising event, he shows up. People who say no one is indispensable haven’t met Simon.
Easy Ways You Can Help

Give us someone else’s money! If you shop anywhere in the U.S., your purchases can bring automatic donations to The Family Link, with no cost to you. Just register your credit, debit and ATM cards with the eScrip network. When you use one of those cards, participating businesses such as Safeway, Macy’s, restaurants, airlines and many others automatically donate 2%–10% of the purchase amount to us. Sign up online at www.escrip.com. Our group name is The Family Link. Our group ID# is 3375889. Our ZIP code is 94114.

Community Thrift Store, 625 Valencia St., sends us proceeds when they sell your donated items. Be sure to specify our account, #15. Think of them when you clean out your closets or re-decorate, or when nobody bought those really good things at your garage sale. They’ll send a truck to pick up furniture; call 415-861-4910.

Cole Hardware, with four stores in San Francisco, will give us 10% of your pre-tax purchase amount if you ask the cashier to credit the sale to The Family Link. Please support this local business, which in turn supports us.

We can arrange for you to Donate A Car to us and reap rewards at tax time. Once an automobile is donated to us, we can be added to an online list that may bring further donations. If you know anyone with a surplus vehicle, please contact us.

Consider a Gift From Your IRA

If you’ve reached the age where you must take mandatory distributions from your IRA, you may be able to avoid paying tax on amounts transferred directly from your IRA to The Family Link. A special IRS rule (which allowed one of our Board members to donate over $7,000 from an IRA directly to us in 2007) has been extended to cover IRA transfers made before the end of December 2008. Please talk with your tax preparer.

Donors Keep Our Doors Open

We appreciate each and every gift to help us serve our clients, many of whom couldn’t otherwise afford to stay in San Francisco with their loved ones during family medical crises.

During our last full fiscal year we received major grants from 10 organizations: Brotherton Fund/Episcopal Charities, $25,000; Sisters of St. Francis, Philadelphia, $5,000; Frank A. Campini Foundation, $5,000; Macy’s West, $3,013; James Irvine Foundation, $3,000; Castro Street Fair (for work by our volunteers), $2,428; San Francisco Foundation, $1,900; Bank of America, $1,575; Jackson-Wright Foundation, $1,500; Church of St. John the Evangelist, $1,000. And our good local friends, the charitable Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, once again gave us their maximum grant of $750.

Hundreds of generous individuals and families sent donations ranging from $10 or less to $5,000. Of those, 17 gave $1,000 or more. Every cent is put to good use.

Around-the-World Doctor Visit

The Khan family from Pakistan returned to the U.S. and The Family Link house after Thanksgiving, to follow up with the Oakland doctor whose stem-cell transplant treatment saved the life of their daughter, Taban. A babe in arms on her first visit to The Family Link in 2001, Taban is now a poised young lady—she celebrated her 9th birthday two days after the family’s post-midnight landing at San Francisco International.

Sister Ruth, Board President Diana Hartman, and longtime volunteers Allan Berenstein and Janis Berwitt were at SFO in the wee hours to greet Taban, her sisters, Javaria and Hajira, and their parents. Taban is presently doing well. Her parents relish this respite from violence near their home in the Khyber Pass region.
In Memoriam

**Esther Davis, Longtime Donor**

With the death of Esther H. Davis in September at the age of 92, we have lost one of our most faithful donors. For about 20 years, Esther sent her monthly pledge, always with a note that became the basis of a friendship with Sister Ruth.

Ruth recalls: “In her correspondence, Esther shared the daily details of her life. It’s a privilege to follow someone over a long period, and to be given insight into what it is like to grow older and to move into a care facility. I appreciated her sharing herself and her financial gifts with The Family Link. I’m sad that a person who cared so much about our work has gone from my daily life.”

**Kevin McTiernan, Former VP**

Upon joining our Board of Directors in 2005, Kevin McTiernan quickly became one of our busiest volunteers. His wife and three adult children have often helped with Family Link activities and provided generous financial support as well.

Kevin met Sister Ruth at a park where they walked their St. Bernards—Ruth’s Magnus, Kevin’s Molly—at about 5:30 every morning. After many months of hearing Family Link tales, he accepted an invitation to join the Board. He was elected Vice President in 2007.

“Anyone who knew Kevin knew his huge laugh and his kind heart,” Ruth recalled.

Kevin resigned from our Board at the start of 2008 when he founded a new business that provides services for seniors.

He was just 63 when he died unexpectedly in October.

**Our Dog Population Doubles**

Last year we introduced Morag, the mixed-breed female pup who came to live with Sister Ruth after her St. Bernard, Magnus, died. Now Morag has a companion, and we again have a St. Bernard in residence. The newcomer is Noreen, a rescue dog adopted by our late Vice President Kevin McTiernan after his canine companion Molly died. After Kevin’s death, his family asked Ruth to take Noreen. Following initial wariness while they were getting acquainted, the girls have become a frisky sister act.

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**Tracking a Growing Database**

In nearly a quarter century of operations, our record-keeping methods have evolved to keep pace with the times. Thanks to tech-savvy volunteers, we’ve managed to stay abreast of computer technology, but sometimes just barely.

Meanwhile, our database expands with each new guest, donation and expenditure. Our answer is GiftWorks, affordable software designed for nonprofits, which now lets us easily manage and track funds, maintain mailing lists, generate reports, manage volunteers and events, and keep track of vital interactions with our donors.

Board Member Bob Brown worked with Program Director Ruth Hall and Administrative Assistant Simon Dinglasan to implement our database conversion project in 2008. In preparing the existing data for importing into the GiftWorks program, Bob did preliminary analysis of recent information in the database, and presented the Board with charts that illustrate some of his findings.

One of the results of Bob’s efforts is the accompanying pie chart, which shows graphically the medical conditions that brought guests to us this past year.

Keeping abreast of current trends is especially important, and our new system helps us evaluate data on income sources and costs.

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**At the House** continued from page 1

by continuing to write and send donations. Without them we truly would not be here.

With so many organizations asking for donations this season, we’re grateful to those of you who choose to help support The Family Link and our guests, who because of your gifts are able to be at the bedside of their loved ones in times of illness or at the end of life.