

Watermark for Kids Reaches Across Generations

By Cynthia Helzel



Elizabeth achieving her dream of equestrian lessons as a Watermark Kid. Photo credit: The Fountains at Boca Ciega Bay

Watermark Retirement Communities is reaching out to enrich the lives of people at the opposite end of the age spectrum. The Tucson, Ariz.-based senior living provider serves children and young adults age 6 to 22 in a unique way through its Watermark for Kids nonprofit organization.

“Watermark for Kids provides individual funding to help kids attain goals they would not otherwise be able to reach. It pays for everything from sports equipment, music lessons, and tuition for leadership camps to chess tournament fees and ballet classes. The organization’s larger goal is to empower Watermark kids to grow up and make a difference in their world.

Founded by Watermark CEO David Barnes as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in 2007, Watermark for Kids focuses on assisting children in areas where Watermark communities are located. In addition to helping individual kids achieve life-enhancing goals, it also has aided on a wider scale through partnerships with food banks and school districts.

The seeds of Watermark for Kids were planted in Barnes when he saw a program about poverty on the “Oprah Winfrey Show.” A young girl in one of the families struggled to do well in school; her family lacked what most people take for granted, including running water. Barnes realized that kids from underprivileged families have many obstacles to reaching their potential.

He saw that a relatively small amount of money could make a big difference in a child’s life.

“We decided to form Watermark for Kids to try to either remove barriers from young adults who were trying to excel at something or provide them the opportunity to excel at something when they didn’t have the means,” Barnes said. The organization also looks into the child’s well-being to see if there are unmet needs such as winter coats or new shoes.

“The heart of Watermark for Kids is that we’re all about helping kids thrive,” said Jill Hofer, executive director of Watermark for Kids.

Hofer estimates the program has helped hundreds of individual children around the

country, while Barnes adds that it has sponsored thousands of weekend food backpacks to expand the nonprofit's positive impact. Watermark's Laptops for Learners program provides computers to kids who excel in school and exhibit community spirit. "We get to change the life trajectory of a kid with a small investment in a laptop computer," Barnes said.

Helping Dreams Come True

Watermark for Kids liaisons are always on the alert for possible recipients in the areas around their communities. Candidates may be recommended by a teacher or guidance counselor, or they may contact the organization on their own through the website. Existing Watermark kids can also refer peers. Watermark associates or their children may know of someone who could benefit from the program.

Applicants must be experiencing financial limitations to be considered. The upper age limit is 22 so that the program can assist college students throughout their education. "One of our very first Watermark kids actually credited Watermark for Kids with his ability to graduate college," Hofer said. The program covered his books and a portion of tuition fees.

Candidates submit an application with an essay describing the program or project they want to participate in. They explain how funding from Watermark for Kids would help them thrive and have a better life. Recipients also must promise to help another child in some way within a year. Many have gone on to coach or tutor other kids in music, sports, performing arts, and school subjects. Kids with adequate finances also can submit a request for funds to become a Watermark Kid in a way that will help other kids.

Common requests include music lessons and instruments, summer camps, sports equipment and fees, and laptops. Some of the more unique requests were for a service dog, a racing wheelchair, and adaptive driving devices. "It can't be more fun, really, than the way we're doing it, helping these kids thrive in whatever way is unique to them," Hofer said.



Alexis sharing her art skills. She was awarded a laptop with software to fuel her passion for design. Photo credit: Harvard Square

Coaches Guide the Process

Each Watermark kid has a "coach" who acts as a guide throughout the application and award process and ensures that the funds are properly used. The coach encourages the child to succeed and frames the award as helping the child thrive, rather than focusing on a family's financial deficits. The emphasis is on rewarding ambition, leadership, and effort.

Coaches are most often someone who already knows the child, such as a teacher, guidance counselor, sports coach or Scout leader. An associate executive director in Watermark's Philadelphia community is an Iron Woman athlete who coaches kids who participate in adaptive sports. A few residents also have been coaches, including a woman who taught piano to a Watermark Kid.

Watermark has 52 communities in 20 states, and every Watermark community has a Watermark for Kids liaison. Watermark residents and associates work together to plan fundraisers such as bake sales and car washes. The money raised in each community is used to help a child in the sur-

rounding area. Associates also can choose to donate automatically from their paycheck. Funds raised at the annual golf tournament in Tucson are shared nationally. Watermark is also preparing a planned giving program to benefit the nonprofit.

Surprisingly, raising funds has been perhaps the easiest part of the program. Watermark for Kids has existed for 10 years and has raised more than a million dollars. It is sometimes more challenging to find individual children to sponsor. "It would be much easier for us to write a check to United Way or Boys and Girls Clubs, but with an individual focus like this you sometimes have to work really hard and take time to bring the program to life," Barnes said. The tradeoff is that he gets to hear stories of individual recipients and how appreciative they are of their awards.

"It's a labor of love," Barnes said. "It's a unique opportunity to make a difference in a young person's life, so that's what keeps us going."

For more information visit watermarkforkids.org. ■