

## A direct, and local, lifeline: Weber Foundation gives financial assistance to those in need

By Daniel DeMaina / [ddemaina@cnc.com](mailto:ddemaina@cnc.com)

Melrose - Cut out the middleman.

It works in business, so Elizabeth Weber of Melrose figured, why couldn't it work in philanthropy?

Hence the creation of The Weber Foundation of Helping Hands, a Melrose-based non-profit that has given over \$645,000 in grants to 261 individuals and families since its inception in 2000, supporting everything from people afflicted with illnesses, to victims of house fires, to troops returning home from overseas.

For that last endeavor, the Foundation held a fundraising event on Sunday, June 20, to raise money for its "Helping Hands for Heroes Freedom Fund." The evening, held in at the Boston Burlington Marriott in Burlington, featured a cocktail reception, both a silent and live auction and, most saliently, \$47,500 given to seven veterans.

Some of the veterans at the event included a man suffering from long term brain damage from injuries sustained in Iraq; a Marine who had a devastating fire in his home; and a soldier who had contracted a rare form of viral encephalitis. The evening raised \$228,000 for the fund.

"We're constantly giving it out, but we have to get the money in to give it out," Weber said.

The "Helping Hands for Heroes Freedom Fund" was begun in 2003 after the start of the Iraq War to help all servicemen and servicewomen affected by that war and the war in Afghanistan, Weber explained. To date, 69 grants have been awarded to soldiers and their families.

All these families were helped, oddly enough, because 16 years ago a friend asked Weber to evaluate a business for him.

Weber, who worked at that time as a contract administrator for the city of Boston's Law Department, looked over the business called Market America. The company, which bills itself as



Elizabeth Weber of Melrose founded The Weber Foundation of Helping Hands after realizing she could provide direct philanthropy and cut out administrative costs by creating her own non-profit.

a “mall without walls,” markets and sells a variety of products over the Internet through a system of independent distributors.

“Then, I got excited about it,” Weber said. She signed on to become one of the independent distributors, called an ‘UnFranchise Owner’ in company-speak. “It was the best thing I ever did. I started that in 1992. I built that for five years to get it to make over \$1 million-a-year residual. I [then] took many years off and that’s when I started The Weber Foundation.”

### **Running around administrative costs**

Before she started The Foundation, Weber participated each year in an event called “Bike for Life,” making donations in the range of \$30,000 to organizations such as The Make-A-Wish Foundation and the American Cancer Society.

However, Weber started to realize she could make a more direct impact in people’s lives if she made the donations herself, instead of through a non-profit organization.

“I realized a lot of the money went toward administrative costs,” she said. “That’s when I decided I wanted to start my own [organization]. That way, I can give a face to every grant that’s given and because everything’s underwritten, all the administration, there’s no paychecks or administration costs taken from the money that’s given.”

Around the same time that Weber began organizing the new non-profit, she and her husband, Bruce, were preparing to renew their wedding vows after 20 years of marriage. Coincidentally — although Weber says, “there’s no such thing as a coincidence” — she and her husband learned through friends about Robby Sorrentino, a young boy suffering from leukemia.

Robby needed help with experimental drugs to combat leukemia, but his family couldn’t afford the medications. Meanwhile, friends kept asking Weber what she wanted for an anniversary gift.

“That’s when I decided, let me start the Foundation and all the anniversary money that comes in, we’ll give to Robby,” she said. “That was the first event — the renewal of our wedding vows.”

Since then, the Foundation has compiled a diverse list of ways it has financially helped individuals and families. Weber reads down the list — Seeing Eye dogs, victims of the Station Nightclub fire in Warwick R.I, victims of various severe illnesses, a pool for water therapy, a special needs stroller — to the point where she pauses, seemingly taken aback.

“Oh my God, there’s just too many,” she says softly.

The Foundation has become so successful in its fundraising that one event per year is enough, compared to the three or four a year held in the past, Weber said. And because requests were coming in from all over the world, it had to designate itself as a northeast U.S.-only organization.

“We’ve given out well over \$600,000,” she said. “And we’ll give out a lot more.”