

Sparky Harlan has helped Santa Clara's young people for decades

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SANTA CLARA -- They arrive daily at her doorstep. Some come in defeat and disarray; others, defiant as only teenagers can be; but always hungry. Some are on the run from troubled homes, some are on drugs, some on the bum. Most try to look tough, fearless, never letting it show how tired they are. But when they come -- and they have been coming to her for 29 years -- Sparky Harlan sees just one thing: a lost child.

And she is there to help. As director of the Bill Wilson Center -- an oasis of stability for Santa Clara County's runaway and homeless kids -- Harlan has been a bulwark of consistency and dependability, qualities prized by young people often viewed as juvenile delinquents, or, worse, street trash.

When she was honored at the White House last month -- one of 13 "Champions of Change" selected from around the country -- Harlan was hailed by Barbara Poppy, executive director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. Poppy credited her with "retooling the homeless crisis response system," and for coalition-building among Silicon Valley homeless advocates, who engage in cutthroat competition for scarce funding.

At the ceremony Harlan didn't talk about the countless lives she has changed, one at a time, with her passionate advocacy. Instead, during a panel discussion, she bent the ear of HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan about ending youth homelessness by keeping families together. Then she used her moment in the national spotlight to give a shoutout to her adopted 17-year-old son, Javier, who recently told her he wants to be a counselor, too.

Harlan viewed her national recognition strictly as leverage "to change the world, which, of course, I want to do," not as personal vindication.

But at times, her 40-year career has provided as much stability for her as it has for the kids she was helping, as she struggled desperately to hold her own family together.

"There's a lot in my personal life that affects the Bill Wilson Center," she says evenly, her hazel eyes floating just below the bangs of her ginger hair.

Tough upbringing

At 59, Harlan doesn't try to pass for one of the kids in her care, but there is something inside her that doesn't seem fully grown up, either. Call it a spark.

Her parents never explained why they gave her the name Sparky, an unconventional choice. They just hung it on her, then sent her out into the world to defend it. Remarkably, she grew into the name.

Harlan's mother had endured three Caesarean deliveries before she agreed to a medical sterilization. Then she became pregnant with Sparky. "The doctors said it was impossible," Harlan says, "but I always say it was because I really wanted to be here."

At 14, Sparky began accompanying her father on trips from their home in rural Sonora to San Francisco, where he had a small appliance repair business. Sitting on a stoop in Haight-Ashbury, she and her sister were picked up and questioned for three hours by police, who suspected they were runaways. "Then they threw us in juvenile hall," Harlan recalls, "when we hadn't done anything."

That episode was followed by other scrapes, usually a result of her fondness for hitchhiking while still in her early teens -- Harlan still picks up any kid who sticks out puts a thumb out -- which left her with a lifelong empathy for squirrely teenagers.

Her career began calling to her long before she escaped from home at 17. "My dad was pretty abusive," she says. "He hit us, and bloodied my nose one time." At 18, she went to work as a counselor at a substance abuse center in

South San Francisco, and began the nine-year process of putting herself through San Francisco State, and later St. Mary's College. At 19, she became director of a crisis counseling hotline for kids while she was still one herself. By the mid-'70s, Harlan was working with teenage prostitutes and other street kids at Huckleberry House in San Francisco.

Money miracles

When she was offered a chance to run Santa Clara's Bill Wilson Center in 1983, not only was the agency about to lose half of its \$300,000 budget, she had to take a cut in pay. Undaunted, Harlan pulled the funding out of the fire -- not the last of the money miracles she's performed. By 1993, she opened the current Wilson Center, making The Alameda's punk palace a destination of choice for runaway kids.

Diana Traub, who described herself as a "chronic runaway" when she was 17, entered the Bill Wilson Center through its downtown drop-in center, got into its transitional housing program, and eventually found herself being mentored by Harlan. Today, 14 years later, Traub has reversed course, serving as a policy aide to Assemblyman Jim Beall (D-San Jose), working with some of California's most at-risk youth.

"Sparky is adamant about policy, and that's been really inspirational to me," says Traub, 31. She lived on the streets in downtown San Jose for several years, and passed through a number of group homes. "It wasn't until I met the staff at Bill Wilson that I was able to build a foundation of trust. Sparky is willing to go to any lengths to help even one person. You can tell that that's her passion."

Everyone can tell. Harlan wears her bleeding heart on her sleeve. "I love that passion," says Santa Clara mayor Jamie Matthews.

Worthy opponent

At meetings of the county's Board of Supervisors, Harlan became a vocal opponent of jailing children in Juvenile Hall. She also spoke out against building a children's homeless shelter, even after allies of the plan got former 49ers quarterback Joe Montana to publicly support it. "I talk before I think sometimes," she says. "There are people at the Board of Supervisors who really would rather not hear from me."

But there is no greater act of betrayal in Harlan's eyes than for a member of the Wilson Center's staff to treat the young people who come to its doors with anything less than kindness. "Go after one of my kids, I'm like a pit bull," she says. If you've done something that hurts a kid you're serving, you're out the door, no questions asked. I'm not going to tolerate that. I expect people to have a high ethical standard working with young people."

But just as she was pulling together the signal achievement of her professional life -- a home for the most vulnerable of the homeless -- her own life was falling apart. Harlan had hired associate director Roberto Navarro, who dropped dead at 36 of an undetected heart defect while playing basketball. When she and her husband had their first child three years later, they named him Roberto after her friend.

"And then it turned out our son was born with a heart defect," she says. While she was building the Bill Wilson Center -- named after another young man who died -- she was caring for her son, who had "multiple disabilities," and died at 21/2 after spending most of his life in hospice.

The next casualty was her marriage, which couldn't withstand the grieving process that follows the death of a child. But the experience inured Harlan to job pressures, and made her an even fiercer advocate for the kids in her care.

"We're trying to do whatever we can to help these kids, and sometimes we fail," she says. "Quite a bit, we fail. Because they're not going to change overnight after a history of abuse and neglect. You've got to keep trying and trying. And always remember, baby steps."

Because when you strip away the street, they are children, after all.

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Who was bill Wilson?

Bill Wilson Jr. was a Santa Clara councilman and mayor from 1963-71, and the driving force behind a family therapy and youth counseling center that opened in 1973. It was originally named Webster's Education Center because the founders spotted a copy of Webster's dictionary while they were trying to figure out what to call it. When Wilson died at age 41 in 1977, the center was renamed in his honor.