

## Gabriel's Angels founder writes book about transition

by **Cathryn Creno** - Jun. 27, 2011 07:22 AM  
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Ahwatukee Foothills resident Pam Gaber knew plenty about power before she started a non-profit called Gabriel's Angels. But she didn't know much about nurturing her soul.

Gaber's newly published book describes how her relationship with a 95-pound dog named Gabriel and the organization she founded to help abused children changed that. In 1997, Gaber was a vice president of sales for the animal-health division of a national pharmaceutical company called Sandoz.

The company mission, of course, was to improve the lives of animals. But Gaber found herself spending most of her time helping solidify her employer's merger with a larger company - and laying off people she had worked with for a decade or more.

"Back then, I was definitely more of a career person than an animal person or a people person," she said. "But that took its toll. I was having to look at people who had worked for the company for 10 or more years and say, 'You're fired.' "

At the time, Gaber had no time to meet her neighbors in the Foothills. She had no time for a dog. And she certainly had no time for volunteer work.

She rarely even saw her husband, Mike, who was the chief financial officer of Pulte Homes' active-adult division. They both were so busy working, "We didn't even have time to spend all the money we were making," she

said.

"I would fly first class and stay at the best hotels. I loved it for 14 and a half years," she recalled. "Then suddenly, it didn't mean anything anymore."

The fact that the Gabers had no time to spend the money they had accumulated in their 30s and early 40s allowed her to walk away from her job without a plan.

At first, Gaber spent a few months hanging out in her home on the Ahwatukee desert preserve, daydreaming about what to do with the second part of her life.

"The health industry was territorial. People who are territorial are scared. You were always in competition with each other," she said. "When I walked away, I was just numb. I needed to find out who I was underneath all that."

By the following year, the Gabers had adopted a rambunctious Weimaraner puppy they named Gabriel. And Pam Gaber had started volunteering as a field-trip guide for the Crisis Nursery, a Phoenix agency that shelters abused and neglected children.

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Gaber still had no idea that the combination of Gabriel and kids from troubled homes would lead to her next career. But her philosophical sea change had begun.

"It took a long time, but little by little, I was exposed to another way of looking at life by the volunteers and caretakers," she said.

"I was so moved by this safe haven. Kids who had been abused and neglected were happy, they had food, they were safe and they had love for the first time in their lives. The caretakers could make more money flipping burgers, but they were there because they wanted to help kids."

Meanwhile, Gaber had been taking Gabriel to a series of obedience classes "so he would have good manners."

On a whim, she decided to dress him as a reindeer and have him drop by a Crisis Nursery holiday party.

"I remember one little boy who was about 5 years old, with dark hair and a Spiderman T-shirt," Gaber wrote about the experience in her book. "He had just been admitted to the nursery and was in his room crying . . . even when a child is removed from a violent home and taken to a safe haven he's scared to death because he doesn't know what safety is."

It turned out the boy was drawn to Gaber's huge gray dog. He came out of his room and buried his head in Gabriel's fur.

"The boy not only stopped crying but began to smile and laugh," she wrote. "Soon the line for photos with 'Rudolph' was longer than the one for photos with Santa."

By the end of the party, Gaber glimpsed her

new life.

In the next 13 years, she created a non-profit with 200 volunteers and an annual budget of \$900,000. Gabriel's Angels' paid staff of six works out of offices at 1550 E. Maryland Ave. in Phoenix.

In 2007, Gaber's transition from the driven corporate life to the non-profit world made the cover of "Money" magazine.

Her achievements also include winning a 2008 Hon Kachina Volunteer Award, being recognized by Arizona Foothills Magazine as one of the Women Who Move the Valley and being named one of the 2010 Women in Business by the Phoenix Business Journal.

"What motivates me now is that I have so much meaning in my life," she said. "I have a vision. I never had that before. I just worked my job."

In the past decade, Gaber also has developed a deep understanding of abused children.

She believes that if exposed to people who love them and model compassion, many can avoid repeating the violent lives of their

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parents or previous caretakers.

"The children at Crisis Nursery often have behaviors that society would deem unacceptable," she said. "But the behaviors they exhibit are the reason they are still alive. When we come in with animals we can use the human-animal bond help kids exit the cycle of violence. We are not there to throw a ball. We teach children about compassion, empathy, trust, affection and self-esteem."

Earlier this year, Gaber won a YWCA of Maricopa County Woman of Excellence Award for her social-service work. And she wrote and published the book about her experiences with Gabriel, who died of cancer last year at age 11.

"I'm not a writer, and I don't journal," she said. "But once I started, the book just flowed out of me. Ten years of memories just flowed out. I could have written a book twice as thick."

Gaber said her main goal in writing the book was to honor the life of the dog that inspired her and comforted so many children. But she also hopes it will give people who want to start their own non-profits a clear picture of the hard work they face.

"In some ways, running a non-profit is harder than running a business," she said. "Too many non-profits are run only on passion. Eight-five to 95 percent of them are gone within five years."

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