

Tenderloin innovator forms oasis of education, aid

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Midge Wilson, who founded the Bay Area Women's and Children's Center, (shown here with intern, Lizzie Harvey) has been helping residents in the Tenderloin neighborhood for 30 years in San Francisco, CA. Wilson and her Center has helped with the funding of playgrounds, a school, and services for residents of the Tenderloin.

Photo: Jason Henry, Special To The Chronicle / SF

Without Midge Wilson, the gritty, poverty-stricken Tenderloin would be a lot more gritty and poverty stricken.

The densely packed neighborhood would have no public elementary school, no recreation center and five fewer playgrounds. Hundreds of women and children every month would be missing out on food, clothing and expert assistance from the 31-year-old Bay Area Women's and Children's Center for negotiating life with little income.

Wilson, led the creation of these improvements to the Tenderloin and more - and because of that she has received the national Jefferson Award for Public Service.

The award is handed out annually in Washington, D.C., to just five leaders of social innovation. But there's not much crowing about the honor in the tiny, nonprofit women's center tucked into the ground floor of a residential hotel

on Leavenworth Street, where Wilson, one other full-time staffer and 32 volunteers work.

In fact, as mothers and children filter in daily for everything from food to help finding housing, there's nary a mention of the award Wilson picked up in June.

"Midge is awesome, but she is not one to brag," said Mimi Hoang, 40, a mother of four whom Wilson has helped with child care, English language training and employment. "She has a good heart."

Wilson was raised in Pennsylvania and came to San Francisco in 1980 with a master's degree in divinity. Although she is revered all over the Tenderloin for her gentle way with children and clients, she's no pushover.

Relentless advocate

She estimates the Tenderloin has more than 3,500 children, most of them low income and either Asian or Latino, and she says that from her first days in town, she saw an aching need.

"There were no programs for women in the TL when I got here, and there were lots of families who all needed help, so what else could I do?" Wilson said. "The true nature of a person is determined by how they treat someone who can give nothing in return."

Founding the center in 1981 was her first step. Then, as she grew to know where the power was in the city, she became relentless in advocating for playgrounds, sports activities and anything else that could brighten the lives of children whose daily routines included more strolls past stoned junkies than drives down a basketball court.

Practically everyone she interacts with, from the mayor to tots on slides, hears a dose of one of her core philosophies: the late UCLA basketball coach John Wooden's "Pyramid of Success."

The pyramid holds that success in life depends on values including industriousness, enthusiasm and loyalty - qualities she finds equally relevant whether it's persuading a mother to go the extra yard for her child or pushing a city supervisor to vote for funding for a new park.

"Midge has got to be the mayor of the Tenderloin," said Don Stannard-Friel, a sociology professor at Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont known as "Dr. Don" for the community work he does in the neighborhood. "She's got this tiny little staff, but what she's accomplished is amazing.

"She's a great networker, and she gets things done."

Help from Phil Lesh

Among those she networks with are Grateful Dead founding member Phil Lesh, who has done fundraising concerts for her causes since 1997 through his Unbroken Chain Foundation.

"Midge and her team have established a true oasis of learning in the heart of the Tenderloin," Lesh said. "Through her stewardship, the Bay Area Women's and Children's Center has been not only an inspiration but a model that other communities could follow."

Also on Wilson's speed dial are Olympic skating gold medalists Brian Boitano and Kristi Yamaguchi, who mentor youths referred by her. Those youths include Hoang's 11-year-old son, Dinh, who because of that help regularly leaves the family's one-room Tenderloin apartment to skate competitively all over the Bay Area.

Chief among Wilson's accomplishments - in addition to starting the women's center - was co-founding the Tenderloin Community School in 1998 with Jacky Spencer-Davies and Nancy Ong. Before its creation, there were no public schools in the Tenderloin, and children were bused to schools all over the city.

Variety of subjects

Today, the campus has 400 elementary students. It hosts a free dental clinic and after-school programs run by volunteers who teach a wide range of subjects, from sports to math to cooking.

"We've seen other programs come and go, but we're still here," Wilson said, helping out with the food giveaway at the center recently. "It's just so rewarding doing what we do.

"People come in not knowing how to get things, and when they leave they have smiles on their faces."