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# Hawaii Schools' BEST Friend

With the state unwilling or unable to give public schools the most basic supplies and equipment, Kathie Wells and Community Helping Schools step in and give teachers what they need

Pictured from left to right:  
Kainoa Entendencia of Kailua  
Elementary and Bella  
Hackworth of Keolu with  
Kathie Wells

Nathalie Walker photo

# MidWeek

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## Hawaii Schools' Best Friend

June 16, 2010  
By Carol Chang

For public schools on Kathie Wells' radar, it can be Christmas every day, and everyone feels good about it

With uncommon zeal and attention to detail, a little group with a long name has redefined the word "community" over the past decade, bringing a mountain of tools to hundreds of teachers who toil in those underfunded, neglected classrooms we hear so much about at election time.

Run by a diminutive Realtor and grandmother, Community Helping Schools is on a roll this year with a new Web site, a boost in volunteers, a media blitz and numerous awards. But Kathie Wells' simple recipe remains firmly in place: Find out what teachers need, get it, deliver it, say thank you - and involve at least a dozen folks each time.

"It's an ohana where everyone does a little bit and it just comes together," Wells says. Those "little bits" are numerous, varied and useful. "These items make a difference in how the teachers teach."

Items like staplers, notebooks and computers are popular gifts, and they quickly add up in value. The mother of three successful Hawaii public school graduates, Wells calculates that her network has matched happy teachers and students with nearly a half-million dollars' worth of tax-deductible classroom supplies and usable furnishings since it began in 2000.

That's when Wells made the dismal discovery (from local news articles) that public schools have appallingly few resources, tools or funds to educate our future leaders, and no one seemed that upset about it. She got upset - and got going - by matching the have-too-muches with the have-too-littles. Her first score was band instruments for three Windward schools. (A serious bout with cancer sidelined the cause for a year, but Wells says it gave her more time to think about CHS!)

These days she just tries to keep pace with the movement she launched. For starters, Ad2 Honolulu, a group of young advertising pros, picked CHS for its 2010 pro bono marketing project, bringing in wide exposure and the youthful enthusiasm of its members.

After tracking its story on Twitter, the state Board of Education lauded CHS June 3, and the state Senate cited it for "shining a beacon of light for all to follow."

"There are so many who have donated items they've held onto for sentimental reasons," explains match-maker Wells, who pours as much energy into CHS as she does into her real estate career. "They read about the schools' needs and then decide to 'let go' because a child can use it and benefit." Golf clubs, a table saw, clarinet, accordion and pool table are welcome gifts that come to mind.

The CHS network also has perfected the art of efficient recycling. For example, Mark Pillori, Wells' colleague at Coldwell Banker Pacific Properties in Kailua, sold a condo with a forlorn piano still inside it. "The seller told me, 'Do whatever,'" he recalls, "so I called Kathie right away. She calls back and says there's this music teacher at Waipahu High who's just waiting for a piano so she can teach her students. We got Two Guys and a Truck to deliver it to the high school."

Richard Shimmon says he started Two Guys and a Truck by helping Coldwell Banker move stuff off their properties, so Wells and other agents send business his way. Now they help out each other: Shimmon delivers pianos, bulky desks and pingpong tables to schools for free when he has time, and he alerts CHS to treasures he spots that are headed for the landfill. "I pay a fee at the dump," he says, "so Kathie saves me money, and the schools can use the stuff."

Another reliable mover of CHS pianos and refrigerators is Eric Wurlitzer.

The list of win-wins goes on. When Hardware Hawaii switched paint brands in 2002, it gave a huge inventory of paint to CHS, plus a tinting machine and free labor. Then Kevin Andrews offered warehouse space in Waimanalo. It added up to \$100,000 worth of color for 44 schools that have since brightened dingy walls and rooms with quality paint.

Storage space is critical, and Wells is always on the lookout for "a regular relationship" with a moving company, plus manpower and muscles. Space also is critical for other reasons, as Wells' "most patient" husband Wayne can tell you - not that he's complaining.

"I sometimes weave my way into the house, between file cabinets and boxes and bookcases," he admits, shaking his head and smiling. "I don't know how she does it. I've brought home some file cabinets from work for CHS, too."

Another space savior recently signed on in the form of John King of All Pool and Spa, who freed up 1,300 square feet of Kailua warehouse space where wish list treasures could sit while awaiting a match.

Besides gathering and donating "stuff," Wells' colleagues gladly bring manpower, marketing and money to CHS. Old Republic Title & Escrow underwrote the original *MidWeek* ads that started the whole phenomenon in 2000. The ads would list items schools needed and Wells' phone number. Supplemented by "column drops" in *MidWeek's Windward Islander* by this writer, the word soon got out about teachers' wishes and neighbors' responses.

Old Republic's statewide manager Trisha Yee recently invited members of her sales team to create a PowerPoint presentation and fliers about CHS for potential donor pitches. "They jumped at it," recalls Yee, who doubles as Wells' next-door neighbor and CHS board member. "It shows how everybody wants to help. Given a reason and a plan, most people are happy to help out."

Wells considers CHS a catalyst and conduit that can bond each school to its community. A key partner to that end are the state Department of Education's Parent Community Networking Center facilitators at each school. They know teachers' needs best and share the CHS mission.

"Teachers buy a lot of supplies themselves, so CHS helps them," explains Meg Gammon, Kalaheo High PCNC - a position Wells once held when she started the Mustangs' Project Graduation. "And I can just drop off the teacher wish lists to her, since she lives nearby.

"It doesn't seem that we do much for her," Gammon adds. "She does for us, and the donations bring up teacher morale." She also notes that Wells funds a scholarship for Kalaheo grads who may have slipped under the radar or have overcome obstacles.

There are no summers off for CHS either. "Kathie wants our cell numbers for the summer to coordinate donations," says Rosey Potts, who heads the Windward district's PCNCs. (Wells likes to take advantage of summer back-to-school sales.)

Potts scrounged office space for CHS at King Intermediate School and is helping extend its reach outside the district through her own network. Dozens of PCNCs from the Honolulu and Leeward districts are readily responding to CHS' appealing offer of help: Just give us your wish lists, no strings attached.

"We love her to death," declares Robin Hermance, Nanakuli Elementary's PCNC. "Kathie's very generous and inspiring."

Wells' own wish, by the way, is for grant writers and more volunteers to join her invaluable crew of 31 who maintain data bases, send out mahalos and receipts, create note cards and Christmas cards, monitor Twitter, Facebook and more. These include brokers who help collect items, an attorney who drew up its nonprofit papers for free and a CPA who does its taxes.

And more. In 2006 Hope Chapel Kaneohe fulfilled the wish lists of all Castle Complex schoolteachers. Realtor colleagues Chris and Mary Beddow ("How can you turn down Kathie?") paid for the new CHS Web site by Erik Trom of Oahu Websites. Brian Walker, HiBroadcast vice president, installed digital signage at shopping malls for the Ad2 campaign.

Speaking of Ad2 Honolulu - a dynamic group of 32-and-younger marketers - is it any surprise that CHS got picked for its Public Service Campaign award, said to be worth \$100,000 of free publicity?

"She was exciting just on paper," says Tai Leong, who co-chairs the project with Maile Takashima. "As soon as we met Kathie, we knew - because of her energy and her passion for such a good cause. And as soon as the furlough thing and budget cuts hit, we knew we'd made a good decision."

A great decision, in fact. The local chapter took first place just last week in the national public service project competition, bringing the CHS message to a conference of hundreds of members of the American Advertising Federation in Orlando.

"We're very happy we won," said Leong from Florida, "and it didn't hurt that we mentioned *MidWeek's* interest."

Since the Ad2 campaign began locally in April, Wells says it has elevated CHS to a higher level and has already doubled its growth.

The list of schools was 60 at last count, from Waimanalo to Maili, and every donor receives a thank-you note from either a volunteer or from individual students.

"We live in a world where people forget to say thank you," Wells says. "When (the donor) receives these letters, they feel so appreciated they will often donate again and feel bonded to the schools."

To borrow from the Ad2 campaign theme found in some form all over the island: It takes a pencil to write a story, a book to open minds, a small donation to make a difference.

Want to feel good? Visit [www.communityhelpingschools.org](http://www.communityhelpingschools.org) and join the movement. Your old bookshelf will be glad you did.

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