

GreenHouse founder, Kacie Stratton with new director Brian Heller de Leon at their office off Northview Drive.



Natomas Treasure The GreenHouse

"The critical component of the GreenHouse success is still the families it serves", de Leon says. "Families put in volunteer hours when their kids are in the program, and provide leadership with community events."

(right) Alfredo "Chito" Rosado is the Director of Youth Programs for The GreenHouse and Emily Mazzariello is the Community Liaison.

A Natomas success story has entered its second chapter, as Brian Heller de Leon takes over from founder Kacie Stratton to run the GreenHouse community enrichment center. He is the former Policy and Government Outreach Coordinator for the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, with a background in community organizing and police-community relations, and recently received a Masters degree in theology from Fuller Theological Seminary. He has been involved with the GreenHouse for six years through Sacramento Area Congregations Together, and voter outreach work with teens. "When I heard the GreenHouse was hiring an executive director, it was an easy decision to apply," he says.

GreenHouse founder Kacie Stratton stepped down this year to move with her husband and three sons to Oakland. The nonprofit was founded in 2001, when a new church was looking for a

way to meet the needs of Natomas families. "I was stunned by an article in the Bee on the 2000 Census findings," she says. "They showed a single block had 576 kids living on it. I couldn't wrap my mind around that number. Then I realized that block was right in Natomas. We started with play days in the park and got to know the families. It quickly became evident that the kids didn't have a good place to do homework in the afternoon. We opened the homework center, became a nonprofit, and from there it took off." Programs grew to include



tutoring, mentoring and spiritual and leadership development.

The GreenHouse summer camp enrolled 37 children this year, and about 20 teens in a program emphasizing math and computer skills. Through the Twin Rivers School District, the program offers the USDA's free summer lunch and snack program. In addition to those enrolled in summer camp, another 20 to 30 kids a day receive a free hot lunch and snack.

"We serve a neighborhood with one of the highest concentrations of children in poverty in the Sacramento area," says de Leon. "We're right in the middle of a 500-unit low-income apartment complex. Our families are Russian, Korean, Hmong, Latino, and African American. We're incredibly diverse. Our theme for the summer is 'Discovering the world right in front of you.' We have a

Greenhouse Continued on page 12

world on our doorstep. How do we all get along? We view that as an essential part of families' breaking the cycle of poverty. We operate out of an asset based community development model where we build on families' inherent dignity and leadership gifts for the purposes of community transformation."

He credits the foundation he inherited from Stratton for the organization's sound fis-



cal position. "Kacie is a gifted, visionary leader. The people she gathered here to help still have a heart and a vision for these kids. The staff she hired are some of the best I've ever seen," he says. "Our donor network stays in a relationship with kids, so it's not abstract. We have 30-40 volunteers a week, and a lot of them are donors. They know these kids. We're trying to raise 80 to 90 percent of our budget through donors and churches and businesses. Grant money comes and goes. We'll always try for grant funding to help us expand, but we don't want to be dependent. That approach has created stability."

The GreenHouse is housed in River Garden Estates, an apartment complex owned by Mutual Housing California. It includes a computer lab and a youth com-

(right) Sade Willimas (on left), lab monitor from Americorp, assists Dawn Murry (right) a new resident, in the GreenHouse computer lab.

munity room with a library. The current location is a step up from the original GreenHouse space in American River Village, the other half of the block-long complex, but it's too small, Stratton says. She negotiated a lease and found a partner in the National Association of the Remodeling Industry (NARI). "They heard about us and wanted to help," she says.

(above) Brian with the families that benefit from the GreenHouse
(right) Brian is supervising the remodel of the clubhouse and getting help from Councilmember Steve Cohn and Vice Mayor Angelique Ashby.

NARI volunteers have put in about \$80,000 in materials and labor for a library, study room, teen center and office. NARI's help reduced the project cost by more than half. The GreenHouse raised funds to cover most of the remaining \$45,000 needed.

The expansion will allow more opportunities to serve families. "We've increased our teen program 200-300 per cent already since I came on in April," de Leon says. "We're renewing our Leaders in Training Program and doing a lot of community beautification projects. Vice Mayor Ashby has been a major supporter of our summer program since she represented our area.



Her office is helping coordinate a trip to a local fire station this summer. Councilmember Cohn is a very generous underwriter of our summer program. It's ideal. Not every nonprofit has such strong city partnerships," he says.

But the critical component of the GreenHouse success is still the families it serves, de Leon says. Families put in volunteer hours when their kids are in the program, and provide leadership with community events. "As much as there are struggles in the community, there's so much

staff. It's a special place." She is on call as a volunteer consultant to the GreenHouse, and de Leon says he values her presence: "We work with 50 to 70 families. At any given point there's generally a crisis. She gets a team of people together to help. We still communicate regularly."

"I have a lot of peace," Stratton says, "and I know the GreenHouse will do well. It feels so good to have that remodel in such a good spot. I don't get to see the end, but I'll still go and celebrate. I got it to a good spot and Brian is going to take it to the finish. The future is excellent."



richness here, so much leadership. These families have come here from challenging political and economic realities in other countries. We have families that have moved here from other parts of the country from bad family situations. Our families are incredible and the reason why we've been so successful."

Kacie Stratton agrees: "We have an incredible community between parents, volunteers,

Volunteer

Volunteers are needed to tutor and offer art and music workshops. (916) 402-7978

Special Event

The GreenHouse will hold its annual fundraiser, Kids at Heart, a dinner, silent auction and awards program, on **Saturday, September 7**. The event provides one third of the GreenHouse operating budget. Sponsors and donations are welcome.

LearnMore

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