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ALICIA RAFFKIND
Downtown Women's Center

Artist: Amy Thoennes

Inventor: Jay Perdue

Here for the Music: Alan Erwin

History: The Frying Pan Ranch

Spicer-Gripp Pictures



ALICIA RAFFKIND: Standing Strong for Downtown Women's Center

By Carolina Cantrell



Alicia and George Raffkind

Daughter of Judy and Wilbur Walls, Alicia Raffkind grew up in Roberts County, Texas and graduated from Miami High School in 1990 before attending college. While the beautiful blonde turns heads as she enters any room, it is the strength of her heart to help others that truly stands out. Since 2013, Alicia has been a faithful volunteer at Downtown Women's Center in Amarillo, giving countless hours of her time to help women get off the streets, break the chains of addiction, and live their best lives.

As a member of the Downtown Women's Center Board of Directors, Alicia was asked to chair the 2022 DWC Luncheon along with her husband George. The event, which provides a significant amount of income for the organization, will be held on September 13th at the Amarillo Civic Center's Heritage Room. This year the event theme is 'Untold Stories - Standing Strong,' a nod to the notion that everyone has a story that deserves to be shared. Alicia explained, "We want to share the powerful journeys of the women who have gained sobriety through the recovery programs at Downtown

Women's Center. You cannot attend the luncheon without being moved by how these ladies have turned their lives around and how grateful they are to be on the right track."

Alicia's husband George has been involved with DWC's Men's Club volunteer group and is justifiably proud of his wife. "Alicia isn't like some who gets on a board so that they can have something to put on their resume. She is an organized leader, a hard worker and a compassionate mentor," George smiled. "I can't tell you how much of her time has been spent volunteering at Uptown Shoppe and with the ladies in the program. She's been down there doing everything from folding clothes and creating displays to helping customers and offering a listening ear to whomever might need it that day. She is a ray of sunshine in action. She sees a need and does what she can to meet it."

George and Alicia met through mutual friends in 2001. "George was looking at a house out at La Paloma at that time. A friend of mine and I just happened to be up at the Club House. She introduced us and that was kind of it. We've been together ever since," Alicia recalled happily. After a long courtship the two married in 2012 and are celebrating their 10th anniversary this fall.

During college and throughout her younger adult years, Alicia volunteered as a member of Alpha Chi-Omega and of the Junior League of Amarillo. "George's aunt, Myrna Raffkind, approached me about getting involved with Downtown Women's Center in 2013," Alicia explained. "She was such a great lady and an example for us all. She introduced me to Diann Gilmore who has been the Executive Director since 2001 and opened the door for me to be a part of the Downtown Women's Center Ladies Auxiliary."

Being a part of DWC has made a huge impact on Alicia's life. "Volunteering is beneficial for everyone involved. I

think we come to an opportunity like this thinking that we will be the ones making a huge difference – and that is true as we bring resources and experiences that are needed – but what happens is we all grow. I cannot tell you how much I have learned and how much respect I have for the women that choose to go through the programs at Downtown Women’s Center. When they present themselves to enroll in the program, they are often at their worst. They have hit rock bottom. Many of them started abusing drugs/alcohol as teenagers, and their habits have consumed their lives for the last 10 to 15 years. They are literally living on the streets and have nothing to their names. Some of them have been engaging in prostitution. Some of them have lost their children and are estranged from their families. It takes a tremendous amount of bravery to step up and say, ‘I am tired of living this way. I want to get sober. I want to have a job. I want to get my kids back.’ Then, it takes a tremendous amount of support and accountability to help these women achieve their goals. It has been so amazing to see how lives are transformed through Downtown Women’s Center.”

Downtown Women’s Center History

In 1989, Sister Mary Virginia reached out to a friend to help her purchase what is now the Downtown Women’s Center administrative office building and Abba House shelter. She recorded the story this way: “We had no money so we placed this intention before the Lord. An out-of-state friend responded to our phone call. After we discussed the price and purpose, he responded, “Let me read to you what I have just been reading from Proverbs, 21:13. ‘If you refuse the poor when they have their hand out to you, I will refuse you when you have your hand out to me.’ The check will be in the mail.” On September



Alicia with her sister Autumn Smith and their mother Judy Walls in 2019

18, 1989, the land and two run-down structures were sold to Downtown Women’s Center for \$17,500.

After Sister Mary Virginia retired in 2001, Diann Gilmore became Executive Director. With a passion for the women and the mission, finding sustainable funding sources was critical to DWC’s growth and longevity. In the next decade, with the help of public and private funding, DWC opened three retail thrift stores, accepted the management of a second shelter, Haven House (2007), and purchased the 35-unit Meridian Apartments (2009) providing much-needed affordable housing for Amarillo.

Two renovation projects – first, for Haven House (2009), then for Abba House (2013) – were accomplished with federal community development block grants and private funding. The number of single women, and women with children more than doubled in the recovery program, and now the elderly, disabled, and those at-risk of homelessness, including men, could be served at the Meridian.

In 2016, a 40-unit apartment complex, Gratitude House, was donated to DWC by Baptist Community Services. Through the generosity of private funders, the apartments were immaculately renovated. At Gratitude House, women continue in recovery through graduation and into transitional housing. With the addition of Gratitude, the number of women doubled, and children quadrupled. Serving so many in need is truly both a blessing and a challenge!

In 2018, the Haven House reconstruction and renovation project saw the demolition of the 100-year old front section of the shelter. New construction replaced the old section whose floor and walls were separating. Modern technologies and energy efficient doors and windows were installed. The new construction was designed to be



Diann Gilmore, Alicia Raffkind

architecturally suitable for the historic neighborhood. New flooring was installed in the kitchen, dining room, and hallway, while the dining room got a facelift with new window and door moldings and fresh paint in the period colors of the new construction. Local charitable foundations, an anonymous donor, and DWC money provided funding for the Haven House project.
Source: 2018-2019 DWC Annual Report



Downtown Women's Center Uptown Shoppe and Thrift City

In 2016 Diann Gilmore and Donna Soria, who is now with Maverick Club, asked Alicia to co-chair their annual luncheon. "The theme that year was 'Breaking the Chains of Addiction.' We were in the Heritage Room at the Civic Center and were busting at the seams with people," recalled Alicia. "In 2017, we moved it to the North Exhibit Hall. I think we had almost 1300 people in attendance, and the seats were completely full. The luncheon remained strong through 2019. Then COVID hit, and we have not had the event for three and a half years."

Alicia was asked to be Vice President of the DWC Board of Directors for the 2018-19 fiscal year. Knowing full well that she'd be the 2019-20 President, she thought long and hard about it. Of course, she agreed, and ended up serving a second term as President because of the pandemic. "I have to roll off in September because of term limits," laughed Alicia. "It has been a lot of my life in the last nine years and a fantastic blessing. I've seen the ups and downs. I've seen women come and go. I've seen heartache, struggle, loss... but when you see these

women working through their recovery, holding down jobs, and hear them talking about how their children are doing and what they're going to have for dinner, the dinner that they've put on the table, it brings tears to your eyes."

Alicia has been a consistent volunteer at Uptown Shoppe, one of Downtown Women's Center's three thrift stores, known for high-end items that have been graciously donated. Uptown Shoppe was in Wolflin Square in Amarillo until 2021 when the shop relocated to an area within Downtown Women's Center's Thrift City on the corner of 10th and Adams. Thrift City serves as the distribution center for all three DWC stores.

"It was a good move, but we were really nervous about it," Alicia explained. "We had such a great location by Et Cetera. When we started putting the numbers together though, it made sense so that our drivers did not have to go back and forth to deliver clothes. It's a win-win to have Uptown Shoppe in Thrift City."



Alicia, volunteering at the 2019 DWC Luncheon

DWC's Thrift Stores

Thrift City at 10th & Adams is the hub of activity for DWC's three retail stores which provide more than half of their annual income. "We accept donations, sort, clean, and price merchandise at Thrift City," said Pam Lemons, Retail Operations Supervisor and program graduate. "Our distribution employees help donors unload their items behind the store by the loading dock, or we can bring our truck to your home, business, or storage to pick up large items. Delivery or pick-up, either way you get a receipt and a great big 'Thank you!'"

THRIFT CITY (812 SW 10th) is where shoppers can find clothing and shoes for men, women, and children from leisure to business casual, to prom

dresses and wedding gowns. “We ensure the clothing and all merchandise is in good condition,” Lemons said. “At Thrift City, we also have all types of furniture – sofas, dining tables and chairs, lamps, bookcases, bed frames, and end tables – all in every style and color you can imagine.”

THE UPTOWN SHOPPE (inside Thrift City) Designer label clothes, purses, shoes, antiques, and even furs may be found at the Uptown Shoppe.

THRIFT CITY TOO (525 SW 10th) is just three blocks east of Thrift City on the southeast side of the street at 10th & Monroe. Seasonal merchandise, home medical apparatus, tools, baby needs, books, and electronics can be found at TC Too.

DWC stores are much more than just great places to shop for quality merchandise. The stores provide employment for DWC Recovery Program women and many others from the community, including



Alicia Raffkind with Pam Lemons at Thrift City

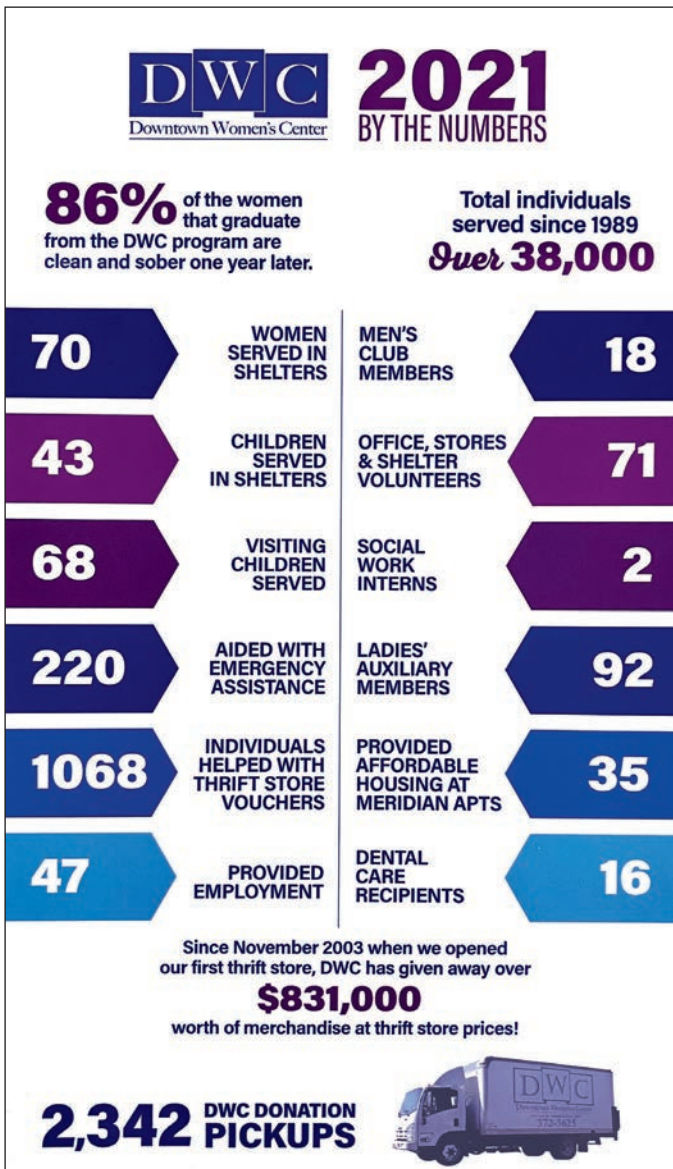
the disabled and elderly. “About one third of our employees are in the recovery program or are DWC graduates,” said Lemons. “Our DWC women go through our Job Training and Internship Program before we interview or hire them for a position. This training is a partnership with Amarillo College and the Texas Workforce Commission. We also really like working with the Christian Women’s Job Corps program. They train and send us good employees. About one third of our employees are in the recovery program or are DWC graduates.” *Source: 2018-2019 DWC Annual Report*

In their recovery program, Downtown Women’s Center serves 80 to 111 women at any given time. “Woman can still go through the whole program and graduate with or without their children. For those who have had their children taken away, reunification is a huge goal,” Alicia explained. “The program takes anywhere from six to eight months. It starts in Haven House, transitions to Gratitude House, then the next step is getting their own apartment.”

Referrals are organic. “I’ve heard so many of our ladies in the program say, ‘I’ve got to go find my friend so-and-so. She’s got to do this program with me,’” Alicia relayed. “Then they go track her down. She may be living in a crack house or on the street somewhere, and because they are friends, they’ll go find that person and bring her back. Literally, seeking out their friends and pulling them out from the pit of despair. If that isn’t love, I don’t know what is.”

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Alicia Raffkind: Standing Strong 09/22



The community bond formed through the program among the women is tremendous. "In the shelters, it is similar to a dormitory setting. The women have each other as well as licensed professional counselors to lean on. They share their struggles, their anxieties. They encourage one another to stay sober and to stick to the program. When graduation day comes, it is nothing short of glorious. These ladies have come such a long way. Everyone is so proud," Alicia beamed.



Diann Gilmore, Jack Hilton, Alicia Raffkind, Mary Schooler

Each year, at the end of the DWC luncheon, past graduates and current participants in the program come forward to stand at the front, holding large signs showcasing the number of days of their sobriety while those attending applaud on their feet in support. "I'll never forget, this one lady put 12 days sober on her sign," Alicia recalled. "I thought, '12 days... darling....' I just wanted to hug her and cry with her. Then there are the women that have thousands of days sober on their signs. They are all up there together and everyone is crying. On the backs of the signs, the ladies can write whatever they want. Some write, 'Left my abuser' or 'Have my children back.' It is so powerful."

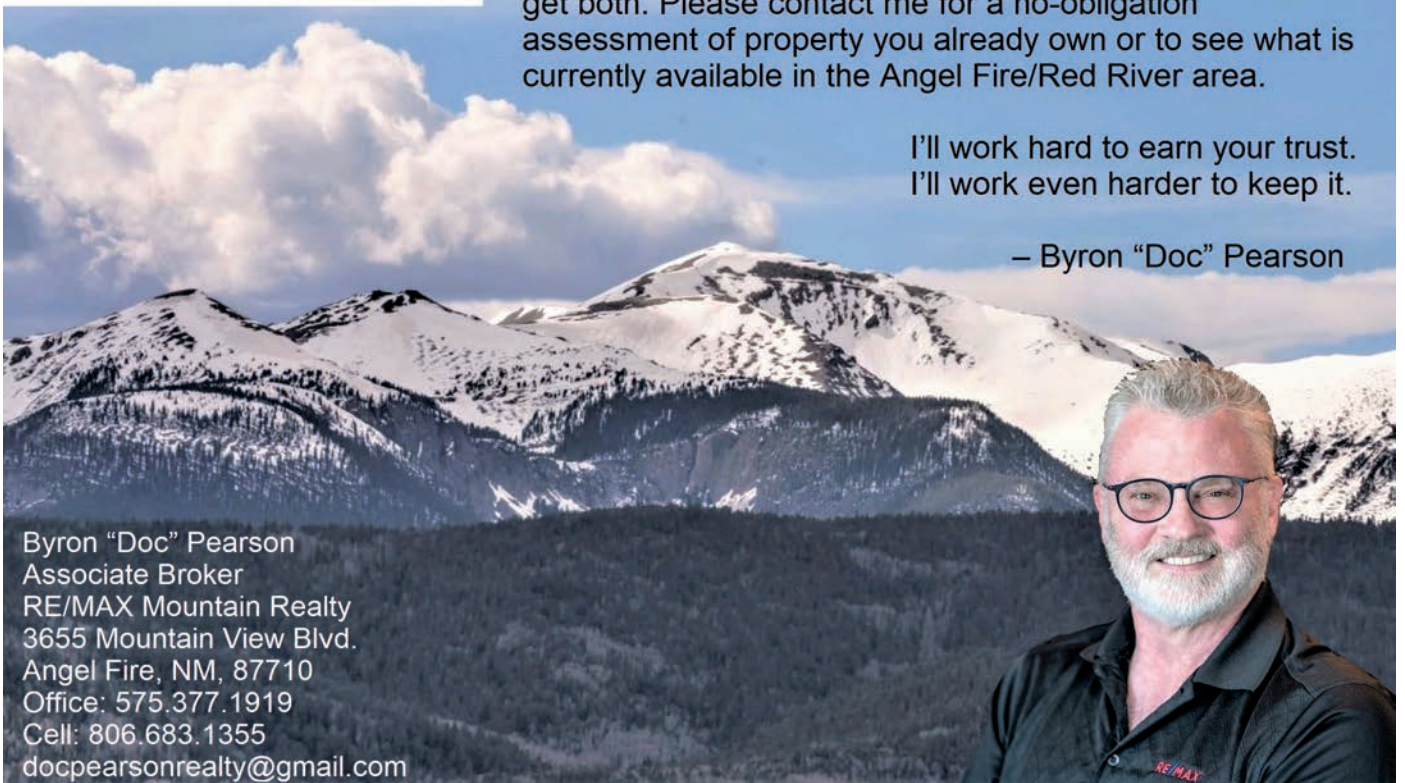
Could it be that this experience forces introspection? For us to think of our own situations and reflect? "It is very true that everybody knows someone in their family or has a really close friend that has struggled with addiction. It does not discriminate and is in all economic statuses and cultures," Alicia relayed. "If the luncheon can help one person - if there is one person sitting there at one of those many tables - who says, 'That's me. I'm her. I need help,' and then reaches out for that help, it has been a tremendous success. That is my goal. I want to be a part of creating a way for women to get the help they need to overcome." *AW*



Before becoming a New Mexico realtor, I lived and taught in the Texas Panhandle for 22 years. I know Texans appreciate hard work and straight talk. From me you will get both. Please contact me for a no-obligation assessment of property you already own or to see what is currently available in the Angel Fire/Red River area.

I'll work hard to earn your trust.
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– Byron "Doc" Pearson



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