



# Kids Korps USA

Developing Young Leaders,  
Teaching Kids to Care.

**H**ow can parents today raise kids to feel loved, to be kind to others, and to make a difference in the world? Henry James said "To believe in a child is to believe in the future. Through their aspirations, they will save the world...and the turbulent seas of hate and injustice will be calmed. They will champion the causes of life's underdogs. Let us supply the children with tools and knowledge to overcome the obstacles."

Story By Patty Kovacevich



Kids Korps USA, a non-profit organization headquartered in Solana Beach, is an internationally-recognized leader in life-enhancing programs that help children and teens learn to give the gifts of hope and help others in need. Kids Korps engages young people, ages 5 to 18, in volunteer community service, instilling within them the spirit of giving while providing valuable leadership education and responsibility. Kids Korps volunteer youth usually start out thinking they're helping others less fortunate than themselves. They soon learn that in helping others, they help themselves. In addition, by working together on projects in the selfless act of giving, both parents and children learn the indelible values of goodness, hope, leadership, and compassion while often also having fun. Kids Korps teaches that no act of kindness, however small, is ever wasted.

Daily information of devastation and hardship pours in from around the world, causing many to wonder how one person can make any real difference at all. But finding a way to turn tragedy into triumph, from the smallest of gestures to the largest of efforts, is the mission of Kids Korps USA. Its participating youth gain sense of purpose and well-being by personally engaging in activities that are about doing and acting upon, not just talking.

*Children have more need of models than of critics.*  
— Joseph Joubert

Young volunteers of Kids Korps learn that differences make us unique and beautiful, not less than, or more than, one another. As differences are put aside and people work together to pull through tragedy, kindness and empathy emerge and humanity as a whole benefits. Children and teens become engaged in activities that foster support and assistance to those whose lives have undergone pain and



Photo by Tim Kellogg  
Joani Wafer and Dawn Lehman

difficulty or to those who are in need of the basic human feeling that someone cares. In turn, the efforts put forth help children identify with actions of good character and rules that affirm respect of (and for) each individual. Children even learn that a modest gesture such as a smile or a kind word can warm a broken heart or give an isolated individual hope. They learn that building a bicycle for another child builds their own sense of appreciation. They also learn a solid sense of purpose emerges from the respectful action of helping someone less fortunate.

Kids Korps activities include help providing food and shelter to the battered and abused, relief to those suffering tragedy, care packages for military families, support for the physically and mentally disabled, elderly citizen assistance, care for rescued animals, stewardship for the environment and more. Its very concept of children helping others swirled in the mind of its founder, local Rancho Santa Fe resident Joani Wafer, until one day she simply decided to do something about it.

*Your children need your presence more than they need your presents*  
— Jesse Jackson

In 1994 Joani, then 48, was watching her three children play yet another video game. "I looked around the room and realized how much my children had," Joani says. "They knew how to receive, but I wanted them to know how to give."

Having been a lifelong volunteer herself, Joani knew firsthand the benefits of community activism and envisioned how a program engaging children to help those less fortunate could benefit everyone. She knew also that in giving, we receive, and providing children with the opportunity to help others would also boost their own self-esteem. Joani wagered her bets by acting on the strong inclination pounding in her head and heart at that moment. She knew she had to come up with a way to give substance to the idea.

Enlisting her sister Dawn Lehman, then 50, Wafer created Kids Korps USA, using the Peace Corps as a model program. The two started off modestly, Joani first taking neighborhood kids to an area nursing home to visit the elderly; her sister Dawn recruiting kids from her local boys and girls clubs to serve meals to the hungry. The response was overwhelming. Good beget good. The children wanted more, that is, more opportunity to help others.

Joani recruited the help of a church friend Brian Hawkins who agreed to help right away, realizing Joani's concept could make a difference for children and families in the community. The human spirit has a way of celebrating goodness, but little did either of them realize at the time that the hunger to bring dignity to others in need would spread like wildfire. Brian soon accepted a full-time position as Kids Korps president.





Photo by Tim Keillogg

Parents also began to realize that the invaluable time spent volunteering with their children in Kids Korps was an added bonus for their family life. At the onset, many of the programs enlisted parent participation, and still do so today, creating opportunity for parent and child to share magical moments offering authentic living and true meaning to their own personal relationship.

Since 1995 almost 17,000 members have provided 560,000 volunteer service hours for over 220,000 recipients of Kids Korps services. From 26,000 care bags for youth in foster care, to 22,000 blankets made for youth, from 625 bikes built for low-income children to 55 homes built in the US and Mexico, over 4,500 community service projects in eight states have been achieved by the perseverance and kindness of Kids Korps volunteers.

*It's easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.*  
*– Frederick Douglas*



Since its early fund raising efforts, Kids Korps took off with enormous support from Rancho Santa Fe and surrounding communities. Wendy Walker, board member and VP of CNN and producer of Larry King Live has helped secure many of the guest celebrities for Kids Korps fund raising activities, including Larry King, the first Hollywood celeb to come aboard and support the organization's mission. Since then Katie Couric, Ryan Seacrest, Wayne Newton, Suzanne Somers, and other celebrities have supported the fundraising efforts. Top Fortune 500 companies and political figures such as Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger have also generously offered support.

This autumn will see the release of a book co-authored by Joani and her sister Dawn. Teaching Kids to Care, published by Hampton Roads Publishers, will tell the story of Kids Korps and share many of the heart-warming stories of the kids who've helped others in need. The book reminds us that what we do speaks louder than anything we say, and that Kids Korps is an example of how we can all make a difference, one child at a time.

*Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see.*  
*– John W. Whitehead*

**Kids Korps USA is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit.**  
**For more information, visit [www.KidsKorp.org](http://www.KidsKorp.org)**  
**Or call 858.259.3602**



Photo by Tim Keillogg