

Karen Christensen: An Inspiration to the Community

Karen Christensen has been named the 2009 United Way Young Leaders Society Young Leader of the Year. She received the award at the Sunset Show Leadership LIVE event on March 3.

The Young Leader of the Year Award was established in 2008 to recognize an individual who has emerged as a community leader and exemplifies the mission of United Way through a demonstrated commitment to volunteerism, philanthropy and leadership in the areas of Education, Income and Health.

Karen is a Senior Systems Engineer with Raytheon Missile Systems. On a daily basis, she works to protect American technology and business interests overseas. Considered among her peers as one of Raytheon's most respected and accomplished engineers, Karen's time and energy outside of her work duties is equally impressive. Karen is committed to making Raytheon a stronger corporate citizen in the Tucson community.

Karen chairs Rays of Hope, a Raytheon committee that promotes employee charitable giving. She organizes Raytheon's annual non-profit agency fair and "Hot Rods & Hot Dogs," a classic car show that has raised more than \$30,000 for the Community Food Bank since 2003.

Through her example and advocacy, Rays of Hope raised more than \$50,000 for local charities in 2008. "It can be very challenging to organize company-wide fundraising events," Karen said, "but I've discovered that I can accomplish some pretty amazing things when I put my mind and heart into it."

One of Karen's greatest passions is instilling the love of math and science in the youth of Tucson. Her love of education is due in part to her mother, who has been teaching in the literacy lab at Catalina High School for 23 years. "I am inspired by my mother," Karen said. "Her dedication and enthusiasm has had a positive impact on the lives of so many of her students."

In partnership with the University of Arizona, Karen developed Raytheon's M.I.S.S. (Math, Information Systems and Science) Adventures summer camp to promote math and science as exciting, challenging and absorbing experiences. Each summer, 35 middle-school girls from the Sunnyside School District spend a week at the University of Arizona and Raytheon.

M.I.S.S. campers learn about careers such as aviation, robotics, web design and filmmaking. They also participate in workshops and discussions with female FBI

agents, engineers, scientists and other professional role models. The camp builds skills, promotes strategic problem-solving and exposes the campers to complex problems and hard-to-handle numbers: all a critical part of our technological society. It also provides an opportunity to bring middle-school girls together to prompt the lively exchange of mathematical ideas. Research indicates that this type of dialogue is a key factor in encouraging young people to enter into science and math-related fields.

“One of Raytheon’s greatest concerns is ensuring the technological future of our nation,” Karen said. “We want to impact these girls at an age when they are formulating attitudes about math and technology—when they can still elect to take upper-level math courses in high school to prepare them for future math careers. I want girls to leave the camp dreaming big and believing that they can be anything they want to be.”

For Karen, volunteering is a labor of love. She is also an extremely dedicated volunteer with the Make-A-Wish Foundation of Arizona. A “wish-granter” since 2002, Karen joined the Board of Directors of Make-A-Wish in January 2007.

Karen has worked with more than 50 southern Arizona families and put forth the extra effort to ensure that every child’s wish comes true. These wishes entail a great deal of planning, but Karen is known for never letting the ball drop. She is in constant contact with the families and makes sure every child knows they have not been forgotten. There is no doubt Karen will continue to work her magic and give these wish children an experience they will talk about for years to come.

Granting a child's wish is not seen as an option for Karen, but as something that has to be done. Not as an obligation, but as a privilege. “I’ve had the privilege of meeting some incredibly strong children and families, all special in their own way. Just seeing the faces of children when their greatest wish comes true is worth every ounce of my energy,” she said.

Karen knows all too well how cancer can affect the family. Her son was diagnosed with cancer just after his eighth birthday. They spent four months in the hospital for surgeries and chemotherapy treatments. Organizations like Make-A-Wish helped Karen’s family with bills, bought teddy bears and granted her son’s wish to go to Walt Disney World. Today, her son is a healthy seventeen-year-old, giving Karen new gray hairs as he works toward getting his driver’s license.

In addition to her work with Rays of Hope and Make-A-Wish, Karen has been a Big Sister to Ileanna, a fifteen-year-old girl in Tucson, for more than five years. She also teaches reading and math to children at Sylvan Learning Center one night a week.

Karen believes that giving back to the community is extremely important. She knows there are so many people in Tucson who need the help of others, and depend on the assistance volunteers and donors provide. "Non-profit organizations are there for people, to help and to lend a hand, should we ever need them," she said. "I feel the need to give back to the community for all the support it gave to my family. What began as payback has transformed into incredibly fulfilling work for me."

We are lucky to have a volunteer as generous and committed as Karen in Tucson. She has inspired and encouraged the youth in our community to pursue careers involving math and science. Karen is dedicated to Building a Better Community in southern Arizona and she thoroughly deserves to be named the 2009 Young Leader of the Year.