

Cohen makes giving her business

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Michelle Cohen, of Laguna Niguel, is president of Mitch-Stuart, Inc., which specializes in unique travel programs that serve nonprofit organizations in fundraising and providing incentives for businesses.

Along with her co-partner, Stuart Paskow, they created and coordinated a breakthrough frequent-giving concept in 1993 and then, in 1994, spearheaded the original launch of the American Airlines AAdvantage fundraising program, which has benefited charitable organizations throughout the country. Over the years, Mitch-Stuart has raised nearly \$1 billion for a variety of charitable causes nationwide.

Q: When did you become interested in helping others?

A: As a child, I donated time at a school for disabled children. Also, when I had my own children, I created an afterschool enrichment program. I did a lot by volunteering for various community projects including a countywide senior program, school site council, PTO and involvement in my synagogue.

Q: What are some of the things you currently do for the community?

A: Today, my company offers a variety of travel packages to the nonprofit community – on consignment – with no risk. This provides nonprofits with an alternative stream of revenue.

Q: What accomplishments are you especially proud of?

A: I authored the highly acclaimed United Way Donor Awards program, created a nationwide custom charity award with Tiffany & Co., received a Freddie Award for Distinguished Achievement, (one of the most prestigious awards in the hospitality industry named in honor of the legendary aviation magnate, Sir Freddie Laker), opened an office in London to introduce charity incentives to the United Kingdom and Europe, a fundraising consultant to American Airlines and the American Committee for Shaare Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem and worked on a committee for "Green Travel."

Q: Why do you think volunteering is important?

A: People volunteer because it feels good to support their community. It's critical in the recruitment process for donations and support.

Q: How has what you are doing benefited or enhanced your life?

A: I have enjoyed helping others and feel very proud to have helped thousands of charities raise almost \$1 billion dollars for various causes.

Q: What is the best part of what you do?

A: Help charities build loyalty to their cause while creating memorable moments and wonderful memories for families such as a lifetime dream of going to the Super Bowl or The Masters, or a family ski trip, or a Paris culinary trip with a cooking class at Le Ritz Escoffier. We have enabled families to have honeymoons, attend family reunions, and provide college graduates with trips through Europe, to reunite families after many years and to enable children to see Disney World for the first time.

Q: How about the most challenging?

A: Getting the message out that you can "do well by doing good." We were recruited by American Airlines to create American Airlines AAdvantage Fundraising, the first program of its kind offering a frequent flyer mileage program to charities across the nation. It is basically a donor premium that is desired by hundreds of thousands of people. The challenge was to educate nonprofit agencies in offering a unique and different type of recognition/premium. We have used mileage awards for hundreds of agencies with outstanding missions such as to sponsor an Operation USO Care Package for our service members deployed overseas and with UNICEF to raise funds to help children worldwide and many other wonderful programs.

Debbie L. Sklar is a Laguna Niguel resident, writer and editor. Her columns appear Thursdays in the Laguna Niguel News and the Aliso Viejo News, and online. Please send story ideas to Debbiesklar@cox.net.