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Sophie
Tel Diaz

Packed with Care

RIISING STAR:
Wes Hamiter

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT:
Achosa Home Warranty

Photo by: **Samantha Farris**

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►► cover story

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Packed with Care:

Sophie Tel Diaz

& Backpacks for the Homeless

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On a lovely Colleyville evening five years ago, local real estate agent Sophie Tel Diaz is at the checkout counter of The Dollar Store. As the checker counts out fifty pairs of socks, fifty toothbrushes, fifty decks of cards, a basket-load of cleansing wipes, snacks, and more, she gives Sophie a curious smile. “People often wonder if I’m having a party,” Sophie says. And if they ask, she tells them, “Yes.”

But this party is a bit different. Instead of focusing only on the appetizers and cocktail conversations, party attendees work with compassion and care for others as they lovingly fill backpacks with much-needed necessities for the homeless. It all started years ago, shortly after Sophie’s son, JP, had attended college. JP had graduated with excellent grades from a good high school and was accepted into Texas A&M University where the good grades continued. Fluent in three languages, with a charming personality, and handsome to boot, JP certainly appeared to be on his way. Things were going great for him, and then they weren’t. It became clear that something much larger was at play. That’s when Sophie and husband, Drew, began learning that JP was suffering from illness—mental illness—and his life was about to drastically change. With growing complications, eventually he could no longer continue college, he couldn’t maintain a job, and he became homeless. For a while, his grief-stricken family couldn’t even find him.

It was a parent’s worst nightmare and an especially cruel irony for Sophie who, as a successful real estate agent, spends her days working hard to get clients into their own homes. Years went by, and the family’s concerns about JP remained constant. Was he warm? Where was he sleeping? Was he hungry? Until one day, the doorbell rang. “He shows up at our front door one morning at 6 am,” says Sophie.

“And here he is...after being on the streets for years...and we look at him and think: *Who is this person?* It took a moment to recognize this person was our son!”

There was enormous joy and relief, for sure, but also confusion about what to do next. Luckily, JP said he was ready and willing to get help. It had taken ten years for JP’s illness to get properly diagnosed and for him to accept treatment. He entered into a program at the My Health My Resources (MHMR) center of Tarrant County, and the Tel Diaz family joined a family group at the center, as well. They quickly learned they were not alone in their challenges, and they also learned more about our area’s homelessness. “We have about 2,000 people experiencing homelessness on any given night in Tarrant and Parker counties,” says Tammy McGhee, Executive Director of Tarrant County Homeless Coalition.



Sophie with her son, JP

That number has stayed consistent over the last ten years.

While at the MHMR center, JP made some key relationships like Steve, a kind homeless veteran who mentored JP. Getting to know Steve, Sophie realized that while JP had his family for support and comfort, Steve, and many other homeless people, do not have any such support. So the Tel Diaz family gathered some items that would help Steve...and stuffed them into a backpack for him. Then, a lightbulb turned on for Sophie, and Backpacks for the Homeless was born shortly thereafter. Sophie had a unique opportunity to be of service. “My real estate business gives me the tools to be able to give back with a purpose that is close to home and so dear to our heart.”

Sophie listened to administrators and learned from patients at the MHMR



center, and later the Lancaster Homeless Residential Clinic, and went from there. “I started with warm items and snacks,” she says. “They need obvious things like socks, blankets, toiletries, gloves, and information about where to get more help. And some not-so-obvious items like a deck of cards or sketchbook. Something for warmth, something to stay clean, something to eat, something for entertainment.”

Today, Backpacks for the Homeless continues to have bigger and better backpack-stuffing parties—often filling over a thousand backpacks at a time. And along the way, they’ve gained supporters and partners like Walmart, Foundation I4, Independence Title Company, Old World Movers, Macho Storage, The Colleyville Connection (of the Colleyville Chamber of Commerce), and more, as well as countless fans and friends.

The Tel Diaz family is proud to live, work, and run Backpacks for the Homeless in Colleyville—

Sophie with her daughter, Audrey, and her husband, Drew
Photo courtesy of Yoni Kim



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they've been in love with our community ever since they first arrived from Europe, then the northern U.S. They have full lives here with children, three dogs, two horses, and great hometown relationships. Backpacks for the Homeless is a way they enjoy time with their neighbors, even more as they help our local homeless. Best of all, JP continues to do well, even as he confronts the occasional challenge. Sophie can't help but beam with pride and happiness over all outcomes. "We chose this as a way to help," she says. "You have to find the silver lining in anything."

Les McGehee is a real estate author, coach, and President of Rialto Academy. Find him at les@rialtoacademy.com.

For more information, visit:

Backpacks for the Homeless (facebook.com/backpacksDFW)

My Health My Resources (MHMR) of Tarrant County (mhmrarrant.org)

Lancaster Homeless Residential Clinic (mhmrarrant.org/Services/Mental-Health-Services/Location)

Sophie Tel Diaz Real Estate (sophieteldiaz.com)