

# Nonprofits merge to provide critical support services

BY DARLENE DONLOE  
Contributing Writer

The motto of AbilityFirst is “We look beyond disabilities, focus on capabilities and expand possibilities.”

The organization does it by working with people with developmental disabilities and their families to create a welcoming environment where everyone feels they belong and are valued.

“We have support for people with lifelong disabilities,” said AbilityFirst CEO Lori Gangemi. “We focus on the ability and not the disability.”

At a recent ribbon-cutting ceremony, the nonprofit, once known as the Crippled Children’s Society, celebrated a merger with FVO Solutions Inc., formerly known as Foothill Vocational Opportunities. Local dignitaries were in attendance including Rep. Judy Chu, D-Monterey Park, state Sen. Anthony Portantino, D-La Canada Flintridge, and Pasadena City Council members.

The merger actually took place a year ago, according to Gangemi, but due to the pandemic, the community and those they serve were unable to celebrate the two nonprofits joining forces.

This year, due to the vaccines allowing some businesses to open safely, a small group was able to gather to recognize the alliance of the two organizations, which together have more than 95 years of experience.

By joining forces, AbilityFirst and FVO Solutions deliver critical and transformational support services to an expanded population of more than 2,000 people with developmental disabilities and their families in Los Angeles County. They also are better positioned to support efforts toward diversity, equity and inclusion.

“The merger made us stronger,” Gangemi said. “We were the larger [organization] and folded them in. We have more efficient programs. We are stronger together.”

AbilityFirst provides various programs for people with disabilities to realize their full potential.

The organization works with children and adults with developmental/intellectual disabilities from birth including autism and those on the autism

Darlene Donloe is a freelance reporter for Wave Newspapers who covers South Los Angeles. She can be reached at [ddonloe@gmail.com](mailto:ddonloe@gmail.com).



AbilityFirst participant Javier demonstrates the quality assurance of the three-hole punch assembled at the AbilityFirst manufacturing program, one of the job skill training programs offered by AbilityFirst.

Courtesy photo

spectrum, cerebral palsy and Down syndrome.

Gangemi, 59, said the organization focuses its efforts on programs that are proven to have the greatest impact on a person’s success: basic life skills enhancement through its children’s and adult programs; higher education and employment readiness; and independent living and social and recreational programming. She said preparation, socialization, communication and education are the keys to helping people achieve their personal best.

AbilityFirst works with children as young as 5 and adults as old as 80. The children are involved in an after-school program. The adults are helped with life skills, employment and college.

“We help them do their personal best,” Gangemi said. “We do adaptive social things with them. We focus on everyday life skills and how to prepare for jobs. Once they become an adult — they don’t have to leave. We continue to help them.”

Adults are taught basic life skills including food preparation like how to make a grilled cheese sandwich, how to be safe in the kitchen and how to clean up. They are also taught grooming, personal hygiene, social skills and even how to shake someone’s hand.

School-age youth who have developmental disabilities are provided with a nurturing environment at after-school

and summer programs. Trained staff provide opportunities for new experiences that encourage socialization, exploration and choice, Gangemi said.

Participants enjoy programs that provide needed personal care (including feeding, changing, transferring, etc.) while supporting personal growth and discovery.

AbilityFirst provides person-centered programs that are grounded in individual choice, autonomy and community participation. The programs help participants discover what is important to them in their lives and develop the skills that are important for them to achieve their goals.

Gangemi said some persons with a disability don’t know what they like because they “haven’t been exposed to things.”

“We help them determine what they want to do,” she said. “We help them with volunteer work or internships and how to present themselves.”

Through center-based activities and field trips, AbilityFirst helps participants in communication (participants work on communicating their basic wants and needs through language skills, body language, picture boards or use of technology), socialization (participants increase their ability to interact with their peers, such as respecting personal space, taking turns and making new friends), and healthy living (including swim instruction — participants improve and prac-

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE



tice healthy living including learning to choose healthy snacks and portion control and have opportunities to play outside or swim).

Some of the organization’s clients live with their families and some with a roommate. About 15 live in AbilityFirst’s two group homes, while 10% live independently.

The organization also supports students at Pasadena City College.

“They have the academic ability to be in school, but need help with the social part of it,” Gangemi said. “They need to know how to talk to their professor, and how to get to campus. They are assigned an education support person.”

When it comes to manufacturing, AbilityFirst has a dedicated workforce, equipment, material storage and handling capabilities to service a wide variety of assembly needs. They specialize in a wide range of materials and parts from wood, aluminum, plastic, metal, corrugated and more.

The organization’s customers include government, commercial, consumer and industrial. AbilityFirst assembles final goods, sub-assemblies product displays and more.

AbilityFirst is not all work and no play. The nonprofit also offers a one-week summer camp at Camp Paivika, located in the San Bernardino National Forest for kids and adults at different times of the year.

“It’s fun,” Gangemi said. “It’s their vacation. Some families are never able to get away.”

When COVID forced AbilityFirst to close its doors, Gangemi said the staff rose to the occasion and delivered remote programs.

“We were able to do some of the programming through Zoom,” Gangemi said. “We used Facetime and made phone calls. We sent notes and cards because we know it’s isolating to have a disability.”

AbilityFirst is currently back to in-person activities but on a limited basis.

“What we did was we focused on each person’s individual goals,” Gangemi said. “Then we started meet-

ing at alternate locations. We met them in the community, their front yard or a park. We did it in a smaller capacity. We made sure to follow protocols.”

During the shutdown, group homes went into 24-hour-a-day mode because no one was going out.

“We were there keeping them engaged,” Gangemi said. “We monitored all the [federal health] guidelines. We understood that they needed that social support.”

The online programming is designed to inspire socialization and fun and to overcome some of the isolation and feelings of anxiety that can result from the disruption of daily routines.

Activities include learning new technology and computer skills, exercise and other physical activities, and personal care and self-advocacy.

The virtual and alternative programs help to empower individuals to continue to identify and explore their interests and goals, effectively communicate their needs and wants, interact in a variety of new activities and environments, and live healthy and active lifestyles.

Gangemi said there are misconceptions about people with developmental disabilities.

“The biggest misconception is that people underestimate people with a disability and the impact it has with having someone with a disability,” she said. “It can strengthen the whole team. They are model employees. They are happy someone took a chance on them. It changes the dynamic of the workforce. They get you to look at things differently. They see things we don’t.”

Gangemi, who studied communications at Washington State University and calls Tacoma home even though she grew up in a military family and lived in several locations, has been with AbilityFirst as its CEO since 2004.

Working with the organization gives her “total satisfaction.”

“When I hear the staff and families talk about the difference we have made, and when we make an impact on everyone in the household including siblings and the parents, it’s heartwarming,” she said.

# Mall to host return of Leimert Park Jazz Festival

BY DARLENE DONLOE  
Contributing Writer

LEIMERT PARK — The community will celebrate jazz and the cultural heritage of the Leimert Park enclave at the Leimert Park Jazz Festival Aug. 28 on the upper parking deck at the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza.

The public is invited to attend live performances featuring some of L.A.’s premier jazz artists from 3 to 8:45 p.m. Admission is free and doors open at 2 p.m.

“I’m expecting this to be the year the festival is put on the map,” said Diane Robertson, who is the executive producer of the festival in association with the World Stage. “The new location and strong artist lineup will, undoubtedly, grab and excite the crowd. People are eager to get back out.”

Initially, Robertson was going to continue with a virtual presentation as she did in 2020. She also thought about presenting a drive-in concert.

After consulting with her advisory board and others, she decided to make the festival live for the first time since she rebranded the event that at one time was a block party on a street adjacent to Leimert Park.

Darlene Donloe is a freelance reporter for Wave Newspapers who covers South Los Angeles. She can be reached at [ddonloe@gmail.com](mailto:ddonloe@gmail.com).



Singer Sy Smith will kick off the Leimert Park Jazz Festival at 3 p.m. Aug. 28 in the upper parking deck at the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza.

Courtesy photo

“Another virtual event would not have been appealing,” Robertson said. “There has been an overabundance of virtual events. People have virtual event fatigue.”

“When the state opened on June 15 and venues started producing live events, the consensus was to do an outdoor event. We’re confident we have produced a first-rate show.”

Robertson, who started working on the event in June, said producing it was challenging.

“There are a lot of moving

pieces to this kind of event,” she said. “I have so many balls in the air. It’s all worth it, though, because I know this is going to be a successful event.”

Robertson said the festival has been “growing organically” for several years.

“I see it having longevity,” she said. “This year, because it’s at the mall, it has changed the whole dynamic. I didn’t know it was going to be so big. The challenge has been doing this during COVID and not knowing from week to week if

we had to stop our planning.”

Robertson said other challenges include corporate sponsorship.

“We are a fledgling festival,” she said. “I am particular about what I put my name to. The size is irrelevant. It needs to be produced impeccably. Also, a challenge has been trying to pull this together in three months. We started at the top of June. So next year, I’m going to start planning 11 months out.”

For decades, Leimert Park has served as the center of African American art, music and culture in Los Angeles.

One of Los Angeles’ most vibrant and historic neighborhoods, Leimert Park is home to the World Stage Performance Gallery, the Vision Theatre, Barbara Morrison Center for the Performing Arts, KAOS Network, Fernando Pulum Community Arts Center, Art + Practice and more.

This year’s event, hosted by Leroy Downs, will feature Sy Smith, Dwight Trible, Katalyst Collective; Adaawe, Azar Lawrence, Jose Rizo’s Mongorama, and Albert ‘Tootie’ Heath, featuring Jacques Lesure.

Smith will open the festival at 3 p.m. followed by Adaawe, the Katalyst Collective, Lawrence, Mongorama and Heath.

City Councilmen Mark Ridley-Thomas and Marqueece Harris-Dawson are expected to participate, Ridley-Thomas introducing the closing act and Harris-Dawson introducing the winners of the festival’s art competition.

Assemblyman Isaac Bryan is

expected to encourage the community to take advantage of the free vaccinations offered at the event.

The Leimert Park Jazz Festival grew out of the Sutro Avenue Summer Soiree, an annual community block party that began in 2015 on a residential street in Leimert Park that drew a culturally diverse, family-friendly audience. A jazz stage was added to the Soiree in 2018 and 2019.

The event was rebranded as the Leimert Park Jazz Festival in 2020. Due to COVID-19, it was presented as a virtual festival that was held on Facebook Live and YouTube.

Besides the music, a number of food trucks also will be on site.

This year’s festival also will feature free COVID-19 vaccinations to unvaccinated people 12 and over with no appointment and no insurance required. There also will be backpacks with free school supplies given away.

Free HIV/STD testing will be provided by the Black Leadership AIDS Crisis Coalition of the AIDS Health Foundation. No appointment is necessary.

Besides the music, there will be a community resources zone and a health and wellness zone where festival goers can obtain information about first-time homebuyer programs, small business/entrepreneurial programs, physical/emotional/mental wellness programs and services, youth programs and services, and more.

The popular kids zone has been eliminated for safety precautions.

The winner and finalists of the festival’s second annual Art Competition, will display their artwork along with other local artists in the Visual Arts Tent, managed by visual artist and Aziz Gallerie owner, Aziz Diagne.

Jacadi White is the winner of the art competition and the finalists are Maria Elena Cruz and Udeze Chidi Ukwuoma.

Robertson said strict COVID protocols will be in place and enforced throughout the festival.

“I am concerned about the rising COVID numbers, which is why we want to be sure we are producing a safe, responsible festival,” she said.

Robertson said festival organizers are going to “do the best we can” to ensure safety.

“We have indicated that everyone, regardless of vaccination status, will be required to wear a mask,” she said. “We will have signage to that effect. We will have masks available for those who need them.”

“We have strong security and volunteers who will be deployed throughout the event space. We will not be confrontational. Unless they are actively eating or drinking, we are asking everyone to wear a mask. We need the cooperation of our guests.”

For more information, visit [www.leimertparkjazzfestival.com](http://www.leimertparkjazzfestival.com).

# City stages first virtual cannabis career fair

BY URAL GARRETT  
Contributing Writer

LOS ANGELES — The city Department of Cannabis Regulation held its first virtual career fair titled “GROW 2021” over Zoom Aug. 21.

Created in partnership with all-in-one contracting, business modeling and finance service provider firm WADECO Business Center, the event was creat-

ed to educate the community on how to grow, cultivate, sell and distribute the controversial cannabis legally.

“Now that it’s legalized, people want to get into the cannabis industry but they don’t necessarily know the steps or what to do so we created this job fair to help educate those who wanted to learn more,” said WADECO Executive Assistant Dejah Raouf.

Besides providing panels

for potential cannabis entrepreneurs, there was also information available for those with interest in working within the industry. Raouf mentioned that nearly 700 individuals registered for the event.

“A bunch of the panelists talked about what they do and how they got started but also gave a listing of jobs that viewers could go after,” Raouf said. “It was a two-way opportunity for people

to educate themselves on the industry and to possibly find jobs as well.”

Considered one of the most notable women in the cannabis industry, Apothecary Brands CEO Whitney Beatty served as the keynote speaker of the event. Apothecary’s cases have become popular for cannabis users who want an efficient, affordable and protective way of protecting their drugs.

Other speakers also included WADECO founder Connie Sparks, Social Equality Program Director for LA City Department of Cannabis Regulation Dr. Imani Brown and the head of the L.A. City Department of Cannabis Regulation, Cat Packer.

Spread across panels focusing on retail, cultivation and distribution/marketing, attendees were given advice from individuals within the industry like Emery

Morrison, co-founder of online cannabis retailer CampNova.

“This is the time to explore different career and entrepreneur opportunities in the growing cannabis industry,” said Morrison. “The amount of time and financial struggles that come with the cannabis licenses are some things that most ambitious entrepreneurs don’t consider, but need to know before jumping in head first.”