

Central High grad coaxes celebs into calendar

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TECHNICALLY, I WOULD be correct, but still, I think I could get in a lot of hot water if I described Stephanie Sandler as a calendar girl.

You might get the impression she was a pinup or something when, in fact, she's the vice president of The Giving Back Fund, a national nonprofit that helps celebrities increase the impact of their charitable giving.

Toward that end, Stephanie has produced the first celebrity philanthropy calendar of its kind. It's called "12 Reasons to Give," and if you have a calendar in your office with "Far Side" cartoons or pictures of cats . . . well, I can't help you.

Back to Stephanie Sandler.

No, she's not related to Adam Sandler.

She gets that all the time – especially now that she's living out in Southern California – but the fact of the matter is that the two were classmates at the Webster School, at Hillside Junior High and at Central with the Class of '84.

"Home room was always entertaining," she laughed.

Now she's out there in the entertainment capital of the world and she's trying to do something that would be trying under the best of circumstances. She's trying to convince celebrities – athletes, actors and entertainers – to give away money.

That's the mission of The Giving Back Fund.

"The reality of the celebrity community is that there's a big learning curve when it comes to philanthropy," Stephanie said. "A lot of celebrities donate their time and their talent, but they don't give financially. What we do with The Giving Back Fund is encourage them to give money to worthy charities."

Why don't they do it on their own?

"There are a lot of reasons why people with money don't give it away," she said. "Out here, a lot of them are new to money, they don't know how long they'll be in the money and by the time they get through with agents and lawyers, they may not take home nearly as much money as we think."

"And with a lot of professional athletes," she added, "they may have been recipients of charities not that long ago, so there's a lot of insecurity. A lot of them are also providing support to large, extended families, so when you think of the average philanthropist as being an older white male, the fact that these young people can be willing to donate large sums to charity is extraordinary."

She's right.



By getting celebrities such as Angelina Jolie to appear in her charitable calendar, Stephanie Sandler hopes to steer other celebrities toward philanthropic giving. (COURTESY PHOTO)

There is no one ordinary in her calendar.

She pulled together a dozen celebrities – black, white, male, female, young and younger – and she did it through sheer force of will.

“No one out here thought I could do it,” she laughed, “but I thought this was just what The Giving Back Fund should be about. It’s a very pure project and to do it, I knew I needed a very diverse group of celebrities and I needed a benchmark for giving.

“I decided on a million dollars,” she said. “It’s a very arbitrary number, I know, but it’s also very visceral, so I started going through philanthropic journals and pieces on high-profile individuals who donated to that level. Then it was, who can I get?”

She started with the late Christopher Reeve.

“He was the first to say yes,” Stephanie said, “and I knew he would. I knew he would get it because he understood the leverage of celebrity and he wanted to use it to make a difference, which is precisely what we’re all about.”

Next came NBA star David Robinson.

“We had someone on our staff who had worked for the NBA and she said I’d never get him because he was too shy. I took that as a big challenge.”

She got him.

Then she got Sting, hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons, and Leonardo DiCaprio.

“Once we had Sting, the momentum just grew from there,” Stephanie said, “and what we learned was that there are people who might not be a big public draw, but they are hugely respected within the celebrity community. Russell Simmons was huge. When people see he’s involved or Sting’s involved, they want to be involved.”

The calendar evolved rapidly.

“We asked them for photos that represented their philanthropic commitment,” the Emerson College graduate said. “That’s it. I promised I would respect their likeness and their image. Basically, I asked them to trust me. And they did.”

The list of participants grew to include Rosie O’Donnell, actor Edward Norton, NBA star Alonzo Mourning, tennis great Andre Agassi, singers Amy Grant and Sarah McLachlan and actress Angelina Jolie, whose calendar photo is striking.

“She’s not even wearing make-up in the picture,” Stephanie said of the Oscar winner who was photographed at a refugee camp in Africa, “but she’s so incredibly beautiful – just being herself – you can see the kids looking at her trying to figure out why she would give of herself to be there with them.”

She gives of herself because she, like the other in the calendar, have got the philanthropy thing figured out. Now Stephanie can use them as role models.

“That’s the whole point,” she agreed. “All of the money from the calendar sales will be pooled and then divided amongst their 12 charities, but more than the money, we want to be able to point to these people and use them as role models to foster giving.

“It’s a delicate balance when you try to mix philanthropy with the entertainment business,” she said. “You need to remember that glitz and glamour raise awareness, but raising awareness isn’t the goal. Raising money to accomplish something good, that’s the goal. That’s what this is all about.”

She’s about halfway through her next calendar.

Even though her first calendar hasn’t been turned past February, which shows David Robinson and the kids at Carver Academy, she’s hard at work on a 2006 version.

The preliminary cast includes singers Bonnie Raitt and Alanis Morissette, NASCAR’s Tony Stewart, guitar god Carlos Santana, skateboard demon Tony Hawk and NBA ambassador Dikembe Mutombo.

You’ll have to wait a while to see who rounds out Stephanie’s field of celebrity philanthropists for next year, but this year’s cast can be seen in selected Borders Books outlets, on amazon.com, or by visiting www.givingback.org.

You could probably find one in the Auburn home of Stephanie’s parents, Jerry and Suzie Sandler, but as much as she’d like to see them there, you won’t find the “12 Reasons to Give” calendars on the walls at her alma mater.

Don’t forget, she works for a nonprofit.

“I’d love to get one on the wall of every classroom at Central,” she said, “if I could only afford to buy them.”

John Clayton’s latest book is a collection of veterans-related stories entitled, “New Hampshire: War and Peace.” His e-mail address is jclayton@theunionleader.com.