



Walk with Sally and Adia partners Pamela Penson and Nick Arquette. Photo by Michael Harrington

A helping, mentoring hand

by Yvonne Liu

Mentoring youth, helping seniors and acting may seem like unrelated activities, but for Nick Arquette, they all work well together. Redondo Beach resident Arquette, cousin of actors Patricia and David Arquette, founded Walk with Sally, a nonprofit organization that mentors children whose parents have cancer. Nick then partnered with WWS's CEO Pamela Penson to start Adia, a for-profit home health care company. At the same time, he manages to find time to audition for roles on the silver screen, television and stage.

Nick Arquette grew up wanting to be normal. After all, it's tough to be a kid. It's even tougher when your parent has cancer and dinner conversations revolve around not only homework and soccer, but also chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Arquette's mother, Sally, was a single mom with breast cancer. Nick remembers wishing that his mom wasn't bald and could attend his school programs and soccer games.

When Nick was 12, he and his brother watched their mother die. Then they went to live with a father they barely knew.

After Nick grew up, he moved to Southern California, seeking fame and fortune as an actor. He landed roles in "Forrest Gump," "Beverly Hills 90210," among others. And yes, he waited tables, too. He eventually segued to the business side of the entertainment industry.

Then he met an 8-year-old named Hussany, whose mother had died of cancer, and Arquette decided to take the boy under his wing.

As a result, Walk with Sally was born three years ago as a mentoring program for children of parents with cancer. The organization pairs "mentors" - individuals who have had cancer touch their lives - with youth, ages 7 - 17, who have a parent or guardian who suffers with or has died from cancer.

According to the WWS website, "One in four parents/guardians are diagnosed with cancer each year. Parents are often unable to help their children understand

Penson and Arquette offer personal aid to young people whose lives have been touched by cancer

what to expect or how to deal with the illness. Without emotional support, these children may later face insurmountable life challenges."

With President/CEO and Executive Director Penson at its helm, WWS offers children - mostly from lower-income families - emotional support by literally providing a shoulder to cry on.

The mentors undergo a training program, committing six to eight hours each month with a child for a minimum of one year. Activities include sporting events, going to the beach, or just spending time together. Listening is a big part of the "friendship." There are also quarterly gatherings of the 25 mentors and their charges. Some past group activities were a whale watching excursion, a fishing trip and a day at Disneyland.

"I didn't want each child to be an island. Also, the mentoring relationship brings to the surface the mentors' own feelings," said Arquette.

Artist Jennifer Hellman mentors a 10-year-old girl who lost her father to cancer. The girl's mother also battled the disease. Hellman understands what her child is going through because her own mother died of pancreatic cancer. "I have a lot of respect for WWS, and this seemed the perfect opportunity to give back," said Hellman. "I also knew mentoring would help me in my continual process of healing. The healing process is difficult - there are good days and bad days. Becoming a mentor helps me in my healing process..."

Wilmington resident Faye Smith is a single mother whose cancer is in remission. Her son Dwayne, 12, has been mentored by Drew Coleman. Said Smith, "Walk with Sally and Drew have done so much that words cannot describe everything they have done for my family. I was looking for a father/brother figure for Dwayne and Drew has become that, and

more. He's a part of our family."

In addition to WWS, Arquette and Penson started Adia, a Redondo Beach based assisted living services company for the elderly. Adia has been operational for one year. Seeking a steadier income than acting provided, Arquette decided to go into the elder care business. Another motivation was his displeasure with the quality of care his grandmother received after surgery.

Penson brings a broad swath of experience to the partnership: M.B.A., Ph.D. in international economics and business management, professor at Azusa Pacific University, vice president of international marketing for the Coca-Cola Company and franchise owner of an elder care business.

"I knew I could never work for anyone," said San Marino resident Penson, who previously founded two companies.

Elder care is a burgeoning industry fueled by aging demographics and busy adult children caught in the sandwich generation. The founders of Adia hope to penetrate this market by "thinking differently about elder care. We consider ourselves living assistance redefined. We are very hands on with every family," said Arquette.

Their main philosophy is that senior citizens are better off living in their own home than in a residential facility. The founders coined the word "personal care assistant." According to Penson, Adia thoroughly screens and trains their almost 50 employees. The company also offers clients the opportunity to interview several candidates, hopefully resulting in better client-caretaker relationships.

Adia means "gift" in Swahili and Arquette believes they are giving the gift of "friendship" to their clients.

Arquette and Penson believe they can differentiate Adia from the numerous other elder care companies through

ongoing training and support for their employees. After a year, full-time employees receive health benefits and partial tuition for further education.

"At Adia, our greatest asset is the heart of our employees. After all, it is our employees that are building the company. Caregiving is the most humbling type of work. It requires talent, skill and knowledge to provide the best quality care for another person - a stranger at that!" said Penson.

For their employees, Arquette said, "We've created a community with events such as a barbecue, ongoing potlucks. The employees are not on an island by themselves; they're being heard."

Added Penson, "We understand employees will treat the clients exactly the way the owners treat the employees."

"Adia has proven to be a remarkable blend of highly professional care and sincerely personal support," said Jason Shaeffer whose mother is cared for by Adia. "Anyone who needs care for a loved one knows that the worry and concern rarely ends. With Adia's assistance, I've actually been able to rest easy at times."

"In order for a company to grow, the owners must think big," said Penson. "From day one, Nick and I knew that starting a homecare company would require more than cosmetic changes needed in the industry. To date, we have met our sales goals. We hope to be national in three to four years and the ultimate goal is to go global."

Adia is chairing and sponsoring "Polynesian Splendor," a Sept. 29 fundraising luncheon at a Palos Verdes Estates home to benefit Peninsula Seniors. "We wanted to make the event a new and fresh and fun experience," said Arquette.

Arquette asked, "What happens to a kid when a parent has cancer? The answer is change, change, change."

Change also occurs when loved ones age and are not able to care for themselves. Arquette and Penson plan to be a part of that change. **PEN**

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