

Volunteerism

THE HEART OF BUSINESS AWARDS | 2010



Honoring those who give back to the community



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MOST OUTSTANDING COMPANY PROJECT: SMALL BUSINESSES, 10-99 EMPLOYEES

WINNER: Desert Star Construction

BY MOLLY KISSLER | Special to Phoenix Business Journal

The Phoenix Dream Center is a nonprofit organization in Phoenix whose mission is to build a haven for the Valley's at-risk population by providing basic needs like shelter, clothing, job training and, of course, food.

But when the group moved into a former hotel on Grand Avenue in Phoenix, the small kitchen prevented them from providing that last basic need.

"When we moved in, we could only serve a maximum of 5,000 people a week," said Brian Steele, business administrator for the Dream Center. "Only three people could fit in the 1,200-square-foot kitchen at a time, and our volunteers were using hot plates to cook. There was always limited seating."

When Desert Star Construction President Jerry Meek heard about this problem from his son, a volunteer with the organization, he jumped on the project.

"Originally, I went down to the hotel to simply donate some kitchen equipment, but I realized they needed a lot more than that," Meek said. "The kitchen was functionally obsolete."

The Phoenix branch of the Dream Center, one of three locations, was founded in 2006 and moved into the Grand Avenue site that same year. Construction on the new kitchen began in June 2009 and the renovations ended up costing almost \$400,000.

The cramped breakfast bar was transformed into a 4,000-square-foot, fully stocked kitchen that serves an average of 9,000 people a week with a capacity of 21,000 meals per week. It has a new walk-in refrigerator and freezer, dry storage rooms and enough space for more than seven workers.

Besides allowing the Dream Center to keep a five-day food supply on-site at all times, Steele says it opens the door for more donations.

"Since we can fit more, people donate more," he said. "Because we are a nonprofit, this is a very important aspect of our business."

Desert Star employees worked after-hours on the kitchen for almost a year, completing the project last June. The company

donated all of the materials needed, built the kitchen and cleared away all construction debris.

Meek enlisted outside help in architecture, lumber, mechanical systems and other needs, and said the project could never have been finished if not for everyone's dedication.

"What's unique about this project is that the personal commitment of everyone involved was so high," he said. "The economic downturn really hit hard in the middle of the project, and we didn't have one person or company quit."

Steele said Desert Star's employees were flexible and friendly during the project and never got in the way of the Dream Center's mission to help Valley residents in need.

"When I visited the Dream Center for

the first time, I was truly inspired by the people I saw there," Meek said. "What they had been through astounded me, and I found them to be an inspiration."

Although the kitchen is complete, Desert Star and the Phoenix Dream Center continue to work together. Plans are in the

works to renovate the rooms occupied by 250 people who live at the Dream Center as a part of its Life Recovery School program.

"This project was so rewarding, as I can already see how much it is giving back to the community," Meek said. "I am excited about working more on the Dream Center in the future."



JIM POULIN PHOTOS | PHOENIX BUSINESS JOURNAL

Desert Star Construction updated Phoenix Dream Center's kitchen. Pictured, from left, are Desert Star employees Gerald Meek, Jerry Meek, Doug Shadd and Jeremy Meek.



Desert Star Construction

HQ: Scottsdale
TOP EXECUTIVE: Jerry Meek, president
WEB: www.desertstarconstruction.com



Solugenix Corp. is the primary sponsor and organizer of the annual Arizona Middle School Science Bowl.

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Solugenix Corp. in Scottsdale has been the primary sponsor and organizer of the annual Arizona Middle School Science Bowl since its inception in 2007.

The Science Bowl is a "Jeopardy"-style competition in which student teams from across the state compete for a chance to reach the National Middle School Science Bowl. The events are meant to encourage students to pursue further study in science, technology, engineering and math.

Solugenix recruits teams,

coaches and additional sponsors each year for the Arizona competition. Each eight-hour competition takes months of planning and preparation.

The Science Bowl is an initiative of the Arizona Technology Council's Workforce Development Committee. Solugenix works with the Tech Council on the event and has recruited volunteers from technology companies including Phoenix-based Prime Connexions LLC and Televerde.

— Kaivan Mangouri