

# BUILDING a connection

Volunteers find new ways  
to make a difference

By Catherine E. Toth



## “Did you catch any waves?”

The little boy, dripping wet and all smiles, nodded.

“Was it fun?”

There was no need to wait for his answer. It was clear from the grin on the 4-year-old’s suntanned face that he’d had a blast riding the rolling waves at Kūhiō Beach in Waikīkī assisted by a surfing instructor.

And for that moment, he wasn’t thinking about the chemotherapy treatment he had scheduled later that month for the acute lymphoblastic leukemia and central nervous system disease he was diagnosed with in October 2011—when he was just 2. Or the spinal taps he has to have every three months, or the medication he takes daily. He was just another kid enjoying a sunny Saturday at the beach with his family and friends.

“During Surf 4 HUGS, all of the kids were just kids out in the ocean, learning how to catch waves, regardless of whatever medical condition they may have,” says the boy’s mother, toting a digital SLR and a waterproof camera. “It reinforces the idea that your family is not alone, and that good health and quality of life are not just about diagnosis, medical treatment and being ‘cured.’”

Surf 4 HUGS is an annual event organized by the Thomas family to support HUGS (an acronym for Help, Understanding & Group Support), a Honolulu-based organization that provides assistance to Hawai‘i’s seriously ill children and their families. Ten years ago, Brett and Dee Thomas encouraged their then-teenage kids, Leila and Torrey, to give back to the community, and the teens came up with the idea of a beach day for the HUGS families where they could surf, ride in outrigger canoes, and forget about their everyday struggles with illness and disease.

What started a decade ago with just a few families and volunteers has grown into a daylong event with more than 100 kids and





GEORGE DEL BARRIO, COURTESY: SURF 4 HUGS

twice as many adults and volunteers—including many who learned about the event online and through social media.

“We get a lot of inquiries that way,” says Brett Thomas, referring to a website and Facebook page he created, now managed by a volunteer who found the organization through social media. “They see our website or our Facebook page and get inspired and want to give back in some way.”

Since not everyone who inquires is able to take these kids out on surfboards or steer outrigger canoes, Thomas says, volunteers find other ways to help. For five years, one volunteer has provided ice cream for the families; another has been crocheting beanies for the kids.

“Talk about the love,” Thomas says, smiling.

Volunteerism is on the rise in America, and technology is playing a significant role in this increase. More Americans are using the Internet, social media and even apps on their smartphones to find ways to give back and help.

“We know that the biggest reason an individual doesn’t volunteer is because he was never asked,” says Samantha Jo Warfield, spokesperson for the Washington D.C.-based Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), the government agency that oversees AmeriCorps. “With all of the new tech solutions that are emerging, it’s another opportunity for someone to receive that request to give back. It helps to make connections between individuals and organizations that need their support.”

### Volunteerism on the rise

Government data indicates there is an increase in individual volunteerism. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 64.5 million people volunteered between September 2011

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Volunteers at Surf 4 HUGS—an annual event in Hawai‘i for seriously ill children and their families—stand by as a young surfer rides a wave toward shore.

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and September 2012. And CNCS’s “Volunteering and Civic Life in America 2012” report noted that the number of volunteers across the country had reached a five-year high.

“Volunteering and service are core American values,” Warfield says.

“We’ve even seen an increase in what we call ‘informal volunteering,’ too, like helping a neighbor or doing favors,

things that are service activities but [don’t require] going to a formal organization and volunteering.”

More and more, getting involved in volunteer efforts is as easy as turning on a computer or smartphone. United We Serve ([serve.gov](http://serve.gov)) is an online hub that connects volunteers with organizations in need of help, and visitors to the website can find service projects in their communities simply by typing in a ZIP code and keywords. Nonprofit organizations and agencies are increasingly active on Facebook and Twitter, and many have Instagram accounts and phone apps, too.

“There are so many potential volunteers whose primary way of communicating and researching opportunities is online,” says Kirsten Whatley, author of the award-winning book, *Preserving Paradise: Opportunities in Volunteering for Hawai‘i’s Environment* (Island Heritage Publishing, 2008). The popularity and ease of use of social media prompted Whatley to migrate the outreach efforts for her website, Preserve Hawai‘i ([preservehawaii.org](http://preservehawaii.org)), which lists volunteer opportunities, entirely to Facebook and Twitter. “It seems like a really efficient way to connect with a lot of people at