

## ORGANIZATION INFORMATION

### A. History

Since 1998, The Athena Charitable Trust of La Jolla, California has worked to improve health, education, well-being and economic status. After the devastating California fires of 2003 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005, their mission expanded to include help to families suffering from disease, disabilities or from natural disasters. The Founders, Cathy Conheim, a practicing psychotherapist of thirty plus years and Dr. Donna Brooks, a retired OB/GYN, have funded innovative projects and dedicated their efforts to expanding the impact of these projects.

The Just Me Project is an outgrowth of Henry's World, the stories of the adventures of a three-legged cat and of those who have responded to Henry in over 33,000 emails. Over 32,000 copies of the book *What's the Matter with Henry?* are in circulation. Over 6000 copies have been distributed to military families, families of sick children and children displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Since the book was first published in 2006, it has won various awards from the ASPCA and the National Cat Writers Association and been recognized for the innovative use of the voice of an animal to engage humans in non-threatening ways about difficult subjects and feelings. Added to this unique approach is a long-term program to reinforce the lessons. *What's the Matter with Henry?* is now being distributed to teach recovery and tolerance by First Book, Reach Out and Read and the Whiteman Foundation. It is also translated and available in Spanish. The companion book, *What About Me? I'm Here Too!*, recently published, addresses the role of the invisible sibling when all the time and attention is devoted to the sick child. Told through the voice of Dolly the dog, it engages children in learning how to develop resilience and acquire a vocabulary of feelings.

The Just Me Project provides a vocabulary that focuses on strength and resilience in order to open conversations about recovery. It emphasizes the recognition of both skills and opportunities among families coping with the special needs of children or adults living with chronic illness, mobility and disability issues from around the world. The Just Me Project teaches us about community, resilience, trust, prejudice, and overcoming stigma, enemies becoming friends, challenges becoming learning experiences, and most of all that life is an adventure that we need to live fully.

### B. Mission and Goals

The purpose of The Athena Charitable Trust is “*to benefit individuals and families through interventions which improve their health, education, capacity, recovery, creativity, well-being and economic status.*” This is currently being accomplished through support of tuition for those who could not otherwise afford education; by providing living expenses for those without other resources due to illness, displacement, trauma or other unanticipated need for emergency care for individuals or animals; scholarships for homeless children to attend high school; support of respite care and travel for those with terminal illness. The outreach is expanded by the interest generated by Henry's World, and it's associated products designed to improve the lives of children at risk of negative experiences associated with grief, abuse, chronic illness, poverty, prejudice, disabilities, and trauma.

Our materials develop healthy outlets for feelings, an affective vocabulary to assist people in how to express emotions and engage in difficult conversations regarding their feelings. We help to create tools and train facilitators in the use of these tools, which help vulnerable individuals and families identify causes and strengths, acquire skills, and apply those skills to help others.

We will also create a national conversation around Henry's *Kibble for Thought* and Dolly's *Kibble for Thought* themes to engage our mission.

- a. Hard Things Happen
- b. Be True to Who You Are
- c. No Blame
- d. Connect with What You Care About
- e. Hate is Learned
- f. Accept your Feelings
- g. Share your Feelings with Someone Who Loves You
- h. Ask for Help
- i. Nobody's Perfect
- j. Feelings Can Change

### **C. Current Programs and Activities**

The Just Me Project uses the voice of Henry, a three-legged cat, to normalize the conditions of injury, disability and prejudice to inspire readers to transcend limitations and reframe their experience of loss and trauma. By acknowledging that loss is both painful and puzzling, the book and workbook promote coping skills through taking positive action as well as honest expression of feelings. Through the children's book and the virtual pet, the Project reaches past assumptions and barriers to help the readers reframe attitudes toward injury, loss, and stigma. The Project also helps those without such challenges reframe their views of disabilities and injury.

Since 2006, when the initial stories were shared through the website [www.henrysworld.org](http://www.henrysworld.org), over 33,000 emails recounting stories of recovery have been sent to Henry the cat. *What's the Matter with Henry?* has been used by schools and in hospitals to overcome stigma, and to help individuals begin to see themselves as more than their disability. By taking an appreciative approach to challenge, the project helps children and their families see that loss does not determine their attitudes, capacities, or selves. The basic message of the materials is be proud of who you are and notice what you can do, and do not let anyone label you with limitations. The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, sponsored by the Center for Disease Control, finds that stressors in childhood predict the development of long-term clinical and behavioral problems. Thus, initiating a conversation about the changed realities of injury and stress-related behaviors is an effective and necessary intervention.

- Since 2006, The Athena Charitable Trust has donated over 5000 copies of *What's the Matter with Henry?* to children displaced by Hurricane Katrina, and have delivered 3300 packages of the book and workbook *Homework for Humans* to military families staying at Fisher Houses, a Military Treatment Center in San Diego, California
- 7000 copies of *What's the Matter with Henry* have been donated to children in need
- 6500 copies of *What's the Matter with Henry* were distributed by First Book to children who would not otherwise own a book and to children who were recovering from disaster and trauma

### **D. Relationships with Other Organizations**

The Just Me Project fills a gap in outreach to children by helping them develop a new vocabulary of feelings to deal with whatever challenge or trauma they face. As such, it develops a set of tools for educational and therapeutic use in support of resilience. The Just Me Project has successfully connected with:

- The Fisher Houses that provide family support to those who have an injured member being treated in a military hospital.

- Camp Pendleton and the Balboa Naval Hospital in San Diego, CA
- The Martin Springer Institute, which discovers innovative ways to teach tolerance and help overcome all forms of stigma
- Reach Out and Read and First Book, which provide books to children who might otherwise never own one
- The program has received major monetary support from The Whiteman Foundation to expand outreach to schools and after-school programs as well as the Phoenix Children's Hospital, and for translation and publication of a Spanish edition.
- In addition, an anonymous donor supported the distribution of project materials to military families resident at the Fisher Houses. Our letters of support include testimonials from Maria Shriver, Ret. Admiral Harold Koenig, former Surgeon-General of the Navy, and from pediatric oncology nurses and similar specialists.

## **E. Using this Project**

When is a cat book, not a cat book? . . . When a practicing psychotherapist of thirty plus years writes it! Henry came into the lives of people who have cat prejudices. As in all prejudice, it is easy to hate that which you don't know or understand. Henry arrived at the doorstep of two dog-devoted women. Henry needed an amputation to save his life and that is what started an amazing journey. Henry's life was saved for a purpose, in part to help other animals, and in part to teach humans. He offers an extraordinary opportunity for challenged children to reframe their experience. Children can be cruel and being different is a great challenge growing up. Henry is kind and he demonstrates reflective resiliency, which kids who are different greatly need. In the words of Henry the cat, "I am a handy cat, not a handicapped cat."

There are several ways that Henry could be used in the area of forming self-esteem. Prevention is the most powerful intervention that we can do. To the degree that children could champion and be championed by an amputee kitty, they could learn this important lesson: we are not defined by our misfortunes but by our RESPONSES to those misfortunes. Every crisis has inherent in it danger and opportunity. We frequently get overwhelmed by the danger and fail to see the unique opportunity that crisis allows. Henry gives kids a way of seeing, in an animal world without judgment, that there are no limitations to what one can accomplish. Not only are Henry's lessons preventive as they teach us to overcome prejudice, to love what we thought we hated, to trust learning and curiosity, and to believe in our own capacities, but they also reach across all ages and conditions with guidance and comfort.

The Just Me Project initiates conversations around recovery, resilience and the recognition of existing strengths and skills despite the wounds and trauma of disability, illness, or stress. These conversations help to reinforce adaptability, to reframe the experience, and to improve capacity for recovery. By giving all participants a new vocabulary of feelings and taking an appreciative view of strengths and function, the project helps participants move away from a sense of themselves as limited by their injuries or experience, to a greater sense of exploration, possibility, and affirmation of relationships. These recent statistics reveal the harsh realities of our society, in which Henry finds great opportunity:

- In 2005, 133 million people – almost half of all Americans – lived with at least one chronic condition. Chronic Disease accounts for 70% of all deaths in the United States. (CDC)
- One of every 33 babies will be born with a Birth Defect. (March of Dimes)
- In 2007, there were approximately 1.7 million people with limb loss in the US. Each year there are 185,000 new amputations performed in the United States (excluding fingers & toes). (CDC)
- 7 million families throughout the country have a child that receives special educational services. FAPE (Families and Advocates Partnership for Education).

- 7-12 million American youth suffer from mental, behavioral, or developmental disorders at any given time. AACAP (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry).
- Recent research suggests that anywhere from 60% to 90% of illness is stress related. (CDC)

Henry gives an incredible opportunity to reframe difference and prejudice. This inspiration to move from victim to hero is also a means to overcome the stigma suffered by many who experience long-term illness, as well as those who are overcoming disabilities of all sorts. Investing in children who are under stress is an investment in their adult years and in their ability to handle stress, as well as to become resilient. Investing in the family as a whole while it is under stress, or to prevent long-term adverse consequences of stress is an investment in their ability to function as healthy citizens. The Just Me Project offers a way to do this before a crisis occurs, and in ways to which anyone, of any affiliation or community, can relate.

## F. Testimonials

The project's criteria for success are that those children and adults facing challenges are empowered by the stories to discuss their own challenges with others, and that these discussions lead to the development of more positive coping skills.

Clearly, there are outcomes that are not measurable, such as increasing self-esteem, demythologizing disabilities in the community at large and diversifying our communities. The following feedback is just the start of the evaluation process.

**Darlene Johnson**, Principal, Holmes Elementary School, Mesa, AZ. "I really enjoyed the book. I asked my new counselor to read it, and she said she loved the book. Here is what she wrote to me: 'Yes, a class setting would be perfect. They would read it together, out loud, and discuss. The *Homework for Humans* is wonderful. It could be used in Grade 5 to recognize bias and respect diversity, and in grade 6 for resolving conflicts, and setting and achieving goals.'"

**Gretchen McAllister**, Director, Martin-Springer Institute, Flagstaff, AZ. "Your book supports several of our initiatives related to diversity, moral courage, and altruism. We will be using your book in a large diversity project with K-12 schools in Flagstaff in 2009."

**Sharon Tiner**, Teacher, Sacramento, CA, shared this letter.

Dear Henry,

I am a student teacher and have had the privilege of sharing your book with my class of 4<sup>th</sup> graders. The children reacted well to you and your story and really got into your book. As I read your story out loud, I hoped that someone would become inspired by your courage to be authentic. What I didn't realize was that someone would be me.

I am in the process of becoming credentialed by the state of California. When you are being supervised by those who hold your future in their hands, it is easy to lose yourself and become who they want you to be, very much a product of a system. Soon after I introduced your book, my teaching methods were being evaluated. Under pressure I was told I had to be much more assertive with the difficult kids, so I began to conform to that strongly delivered advice. It was suggested that these difficult disadvantaged kids would only respond to yelling and I just needed to get tougher. That did not feel right to me, as yelling is not my style. The day that I was observed, I started yelling. One of the students looked up at

me with tear filled eyes and said, “Mrs. Tiner, this is not you! You never yell.”

As I lay in my bed that night I began reflecting and found tears rolling down my cheek. I knew that I needed classroom management but I needed to do it without violating who I am. So, I asked myself: how could I do it and still be true to myself? Then I remembered something I had observed another teacher do a few years earlier. Whenever her class got out of control, she didn’t yell, she ignored the chaos and practiced putting a golf ball into a cup. When she started putting, the children grew quiet and sat in their seats ready to learn. I didn’t know how to putt, but I knew what I could do.

The next morning I asked the students if they remembered what “jm” stood for at the end of your name. The students proudly blurted out, “JUST ME!” I congratulated them. I told them I had an apology to make. I said, “Yesterday, I was not true to myself, I was not JUST ME.” I had yelled and I was sorry. I explained that from now on instead of yelling I would knit. I planned to give whatever I had knitted to the child with the best classroom behavior. That afternoon, I got tested. Instead of yelling, I just went to my desk and quietly took out my knitting. The kids started saying, “Shhhhh, she is knitting.” It was amazing, it worked. Thank you Henry for helping me be, just me.

Sharon Tiner

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