You wouldn’t think something so small could bring so much joy, but that’s the emotion moms feel when they receive personalized quilts for their babies at Vista Hill’s ParentCare Family Recovery Centers.

Another person who feels joy is Mary Jo Ball, the Vista Hill supporter who has been making those quilts for the families as wonderful donations to ParentCare.

“I really love making these quilts for the ParentCare families because it is something they can call their own, and these quilts with their baby’s name embroidered is something they can keep forever and hopefully pass on to future generations,” Ball says.

The women who enter ParentCare Centers in San Diego and La Mesa are, in fact, at one of the most difficult points in their lives. They are dealing with substance misuse and have often had their children taken away by child welfare services. They and their kids are at high risk for child abuse, domestic violence and homelessness. To help them get back on their feet, regain custody of their children and start their lives over, ParentCare offers an extensive array of services, including intensive daily, alcohol and drug treatment; parenting training; vocational training; therapeutic childcare; and psychiatric care.

Which is why Ball, a resident of San Diego’s Carmel Valley, has even more passion for her quilt project.

“These women have been through so much and are trying so hard to turn their lives around. I’m just thrilled that I can bring a smile to their faces and give them something fun for their babies,” she says. “I also enjoy being involved with ParentCare, a program with an incredibly skilled and compassionate staff who are truly doing such important work by helping these women become productive members of our community.”

Ball, a career fundraiser who retired six years ago as Director of Alumni Affairs at UC San Diego’s School of Global Policy and Strategy, has been making quilts as a hobby her entire adult life. She’s never sold one, but has donated a couple to non-profit organizations which auctioned them at charity events. She became involved with Vista Hill and ParentCare through her friendship with neighbors Tom and Gayle Allen, who serve, respectively, on the Friends of Vista Hill Board of Trustees and Advisory Board.

“We decided it would be more fun to make quilts and donate them to the moms and after we presented a few, word got out and a lot of the moms started asking for them,” Ball says, adding with a laugh, “It got kind of crazy last Christmas, so I recruited my sister, Judy Hook, from Burns Ore., and Judy, in turn, recruited her group of creative friends to help make the quilts. We all went into overdrive and made several dozen quilts so these deserving moms could have a special holiday gift.”

“The quilts have been such a bright spot for all of us especially during the pandemic,” says Angela Rowe, Senior Director, Family Treatment and Recovery Services. The mothers get so excited seeing their baby’s name on a quilt, and the staff also are delighted to be able to hand them out. Many of our moms do not have baby showers, so this is such a touching gift to celebrate their baby’s arrival. We can’t thank Mary Jo enough for her passion and generosity in making these quilts that bring so much happiness to our families.”

The colorful quilts are smaller than traditional versions, with the average size being 36 inches by 36 inches. Depending on type of fabric and complexity, it takes Ball anywhere from five to 10 hours to produce a quilt, each of which has the baby’s name carefully embroidered on the cloth.

Taeona is a perfect example of a ParentCare mom who was thrilled with the quilt she received just after her baby boy, Aurelio, was born last December.

“It was so exciting getting the quilt, especially since I didn’t really have anything for my son,” she says. “It was even more special when I saw it was personalized with his name on it. Receiving the quilt was such a nice bonus for being in a program I truly love. ParentCare has meant everything to me over the last year. I’m really grateful for the help and resources it has given me, and it’s definitely changed my life for the better.”
On a cold, windy day in January, puzzlers came to the Stein Education Center special education campus to carefully place together one puzzle at a time to create Kodak’s “The World’s Largest Puzzle.” The 27 “Wonders from Around the World” puzzles, each consisting of 1,900 pieces, created a huge mural that will be on display at the campus.

Vista Hill surpassed its fundraising goal of $51,300 (a dollar for each piece) by raising a total of $60,721! A WONDERful anonymous donor enabled Vista Hill to reach the fundraising goal with a match of $22,000. The day was the culmination of many months and volunteers, 99 to be exact, plus one kitty cat named Lily Bazinga. Puzzles were completed by individuals or small family pods. A few individuals and groups completed multiple puzzles, like Jemma Samala and Richard Patchett, who helped put together four puzzles; the Brady/Rubidoux families who completed three and have continued their family puzzle nights; and Laura Alessio who completed three puzzles on her own!

To commemorate the project, a documentary was produced by Paul Friedman at Avalon Video Productions with the finale song rewritten and sung by Anthony Bollotta of Bollotta Entertainment. The 50-minute film—which was released on National Puzzle Day January 29th—may be viewed at the following link: https://tinyurl.com/VHpuzzle.

The Puzzle for a Purpose Project not only raised vital funds to help support the Stein Education Centers, but it has allowed our clients to take a virtual trip around the world through distance learning.

Due to pandemic gathering restrictions, ParentCare’s Alumni Group annual Spring Egg Hunt had to be reimagined this year. Thanks to our generous donors and friends, the Spring Fling Basket Drive, which took place in the parking lot at ParentCare in La Mesa, was fun, festive and fast! Friends of Vista Hill Board member Pam Palmer-Lowe created colorful baskets filled with toys and games, and Patti Holmes filled hundreds of eggs with candy. The day wouldn’t have been complete without a wave and photo with Mrs. Bunny, who handed out some educational activity kits provided by The New Children’s Museum.
Vista Hill and Rady Children’s Hospital-San Diego have joined forces to tackle one of San Diego’s most urgent problems: the critical lack of behavioral health services and treatment for youth who struggle with mental health issues.

Funded by a contract with Rady Children’s Hospital, the Vista Hill Behavioral Health Coordination Project (BHCC) is a partnership among Vista Hill, Children’s Primary Care Medical Group (CPCMG) and Children’s Physicians Medical Group. The program relies on Vista Hill’s behavioral health expertise to help parents find the resources and treatment options their children need to deal with urgent emotional and/or behavioral issues that significantly impair their daily lives.

The partnership with Vista Hill is part of Rady Children’s Hospital’s overall Transforming Mental Health (TMH) initiative now in place in pediatric clinics in Chula Vista, Encinitas, and Oceanside. Vista Hill care coordinators work onsite at each of the clinics to help pediatricians, psychiatrists and psychotherapists ensure the behavioral health needs of CPCMG patients are being addressed.

“The program addresses two major problems we face today: a significant national shortage of child mental health professionals and the growing behavioral health needs of our young people,” says Mark Chenven, M.D., Vista Hill’s Executive Medical Director. “In the past six months, the Vista Hill component of the collaborative program has already helped more than 300 families around the county get the help they need for their children.”

Psychiatrist Jason Schweitzer, M.D., Assistant Clinical Professor in the UCSD Department of Psychiatry, who helped design and implement the TMH project, says the program was created because Rady Children’s Hospital is not only committed to caring for children physically, but believes mental health is a crucial part of the health of the whole child.

“We knew there was a real need for behavioral health services integrated into the primary care clinics, but we’ve been really pleased that in the short time the program has been running, we’ve already seen a significant positive impact on the lives of hundreds of children with behavioral health issues, ranging from anxiety, eating disorders and depression to substance abuse, traumatic stress from abuse and suicidal behavior,” Schweitzer says.

The BHCC project was conceived in large part due to Rady’s previous positive experience with Vista Hill’s innovative SmartCare Behavioral Health Consultation Services (BHCS) program that Chenven and his team created a decade ago when they recognized the critical problem of so many children with behavioral health issues going untreated across San Diego County.

The SmartCare BHCS program is funded by the County of San Diego and the Mental Health Services Act to provide real-time psychiatric consultation to primary care providers who serve low-income youth throughout the county. With the shortage of specialty psychiatry services, it is essential that primary care providers treat youth seen within the primary care setting. However, these same providers may not feel they have the experience or training to provide behavioral health treatment. With the BHCS program, the primary care provider has support in diagnosing and treating clients with real-time access to a specialty psychiatrist to assist with the care.

Schweitzer, who has been a consulting psychiatrist with SmartCare BHCS for a number of years and still works with the program weekly, says the Vista Hill program has been instrumental in encouraging the pediatric community to more actively focus on behavioral health concerns for their patients and their families.

“Rady Children’s Hospital is grateful for our collaboration with SmartCare BHCS because we rely heavily on the deep expertise their staff has in the area of behavioral health services,” Schweitzer says. “This partnership with Vista Hill is extremely important to our community because together we’re intervening early in the lives of troubled children so that we can help resolve most or all their behavioral issues before they progress too far. We think that this makes a real difference by improving the lives of these families and ensuring their children have the opportunity to lead healthy and productive lives as adults.”

Rady Children’s Hospital recently celebrated the one-year anniversary of the TMH program, expressing gratitude for the collaboration with Vista Hill and other partners.

“In the past year, thanks to this partnership, we’ve been able to provide much-needed mental health care and coordinated a myriad of needs, making a difference in the lives hundreds of patients,” says Domonique J. Hensler, MHA, Senior Director, Care Redesign and Transforming Mental Health Initiative at Rady Children’s Hospital. “We’re excited for the opportunity to provide more family-centered care and support to patient families through this innovative program. Together, we’re providing whole child care.”

Vista Hill’s Partnership with Rady Children’s Hospital Provides Urgently Needed Behavioral Health Services
More than 100 Vista Hill employees received COVID-19 vaccinations at a two-day event last March at the Stein Education Center. “We wanted our employees to feel safe and comfortable working with the public and also protect themselves and their clients,” says Amber Herrmann, Vista Hill Chief Human Resources Officer. A special thanks to Special Education Teacher Christine Skurnac, who made the initial contact with a Albertsons Pharmacy representative about holding a vaccination clinic on campus. “Christine described the special education services provided on the SEC campus and how important it is for staff in this type of work to get vaccinated like other essential workers. Albertsons Pharmacy took great interest in this and agreed to do it,” Herrmann says. “We want to express our appreciation to Albertsons and their team for coming out and doing such an efficient job of vaccinating our employees.” To date, more than 80 percent of Vista Hill’s 500 employees are fully vaccinated.
MERIT Academy Offers Behavioral Health Support for Grossmont Students with Special Learning Needs

Brad (*name has been changed to protect confidentiality) was a typical teenager, but struggled with some challenging issues in his life. The 16-year-old El Cajon high school student was suffering from depression and anxiety, he was disruptive in class and his grades had fallen dramatically. Without help, Brad faced a difficult future. His behavioral issues could have led to him drop out of school, forced him to enter a residential mental health facility or led to trouble with juvenile authorities.

Thanks to MERIT Academy, Brad got the help needed and today is a happy and healthy 18-year-old who is looking forward to entering community college this fall.

MERIT Academy, a program created by Grossmont Unified High School District, in partnership with Vista Hill’s Learning Assistance Center, is an innovative program that combines academic learning with intensive behavioral health services in a supportive classroom environment in El Cajon (MERIT stands for Making Education Relevant, Innovative and Therapeutic).

Funded by Grossmont Unified High School District and the County of San Diego Behavioral Health Services, MERIT Academy has an enrollment of 74 students ages 14 to 19 in six classrooms, each staffed by a teacher, an instructional aide and a Vista Hill mental rehabilitation specialist. Other members of the team who step in when needed include Vista Hill therapists, case manager and psychiatrist.

“For nearly a decade, MERIT Academy has been making a real difference in the lives of East County students with special learning needs by assessing their individual challenges and then customizing a program for each student that combines intensive behavioral health therapy with academic learning,” says Naomi Midura, PsyD, LMFT, MERIT Academy Program Manager.

The individualized approach is critical, Midura says, because the issues the students face can be extremely varied and complex.

“Their issues could have been triggered by depression or substance misuse, divorce or loss of a parent, domestic violence, childhood trauma and abuse, homelessness or any number of issues that prevent them from being able to function in a traditional school environment,” Midura adds.

“We provide them with a high degree of social, emotional and behavioral support and structure throughout each school day. The unique self-contained environment that has been created encourages our students to learn strategies and skills that will help them develop emotionally and scholastically toward self-reliance and lead them to be contributing members of the community as they transition into adulthood.”

MERIT Academy has been a remarkable success for Grossmont, according to Alicia Owens, the district’s Site Administrator for the program.

“We’re the only program in the district that offers this level of integrated behavioral and therapeutic intervention that leads to a diploma and a positive future,” Owens says. “Students who come to MERIT have struggled to feel success due to their mental health challenges, and MERIT provides a safe space to just be accepted, understand their diagnoses and practice skills and strategies that will support them as they transition into adulthood. We also give families the opportunity to receive supports such as parent counseling, medication management for their child and referrals for other types of community resources.”

Owens says the partnership with Vista Hill has been instrumental in the program’s effectiveness.

“Vista Hill has been a valuable collaborative partner in helping our students and families at MERIT Academy. The therapists and mental health rehabilitation specialists are an incredible resource and bring a rich background in working with students who have experienced trauma, loss and significant mental health diagnoses. The strong structure of support the district has developed in collaboration with Vista Hill is the backbone of MERIT Academy.”

For Midura and her team, putting students like Brad on a positive path is extremely rewarding.

“Everyone at MERIT Academy feels privileged and honored to walk along with these students and families to provide them with hope and guidance during this challenging period in their lives,” she says. “It’s extremely rewarding to be part of a program that is so beneficial to these families and our community.”
Jim Brown, the philanthropist and San Diego business and civic leader who was instrumental in Vista Hill’s success over nearly 30 years of service as a member and Chair of its Board of Directors, died at home surrounded by his family on December 17, 2020. He was 87.

“We are truly saddened at the passing of Jim Brown,” said Robert Dean, Vista CEO and President. “Jim served many San Diego organizations well, but he had a special place in his heart for Vista Hill as a donor and in board governance. His dynamic leadership was critical in leading Vista Hill to its position today as one of the most important providers of mental health services in San Diego County.”

Dean recalled his comments on Brown’s contribution in a New Vistas profile a few years ago:

“Thanks to his vast managerial experience and steady hand, Jim guided Vista Hill through a pivotal time in our history when we divested the hospital services we had been providing and transitioned to an organization that focused strictly on providing critically needed community-based mental health services, a model which has been so successful for us today.”

That sentiment was echoed at the time by the board’s current Chair, Cecil Steppe.

“Jim is a true treasure and nothing less than the heart and soul of the board whose service to Vista Hill has resulted in wonderful programs that are truly making a difference in the lives of people in our community whose needs so often go unmet. Jim is an extremely thoughtful leader who listens, evaluates and then speaks the truth when he shares his incredible background and experience. This has been invaluable in helping Vista Hill stay focused and on target in carrying out the financial and management responsibilities with which we’ve been entrusted.”

In addition to his remarkable leadership, Brown and his family have been generous donors to Vista Hill, contributing more than $350,000.

Among his many career achievements, Brown led the real estate investment firm he founded, Silberrad, Inc., for more than 45 years; he founded and led BSD Bancorp, Inc., and its flagship bank, The Bank of San Diego; was founder and director of San Diego Television Inc., parent company of KWSB Channel 69; and formed Blackstone/Brown Company which acquired and operated Chicago Title Company of San Diego County.

Brown is survived by his wife, Marilyn Creson Brown; his children, Kimberly Stertz (Mark Koch, Denver), Kelly Brown (Avalon), Scott Brown (San Diego), Kristen Brown (Brian Thoreson, Eagle River, Alaska), and Brad Davidson (Karen, Costa Mesa); eight grandchildren; and five great-grandchildren.

In Memoriam Jim Rice

Dr. James (Jim) Rice, former Vista Hill Board member from 1993 to 2012, passed away at the end of April at the age of 83. Rice served on the Vista Hill Board of Directors for nearly 20 years. He joined the active medical staff at Mesa Vista Hospital in the early 1970s, treating adults and senior adults with psychiatric and addiction diagnoses. He served a year as Chief of Staff and on numerous medical staff committees. Rice was a psychiatrist with more than 58 years of experience in the medical field. In the late 1980s, Rice became President of Vista Psychiatric Physician Associates, a physician/clinician specialty medical group. The group was formed to provide the professional service component for mental health insurance carve-outs. Rice graduated from the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine in 1963. His clinical background was of great value to the board and he contributed in many ways during his tenure on the board. He is survived by his two lovely daughters, Mrs. Ariana Rice O’Day, LMFT, and Ms. Hilary Rice.
The Show Must Go On…
So Strut! – A New PATH and Vista Hill Joint Fashion Show
Saturday, September 25, 2021
10 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Sheraton San Diego Hotel & Marina
Chair: Clarice Perkins
Co-Chairs: Liz Crocker and Colleen Ruis Ince
Honorary Chair: Barbie Spinazzola

Vista Hill Council on Mental Health Luncheon
Friday, November 12, 2021
11 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Hidden Valley Road: Inside the Mind of an American Family
Speaker: Author Robert Kolker
Presenting Sponsor: Molly’s Angels
Town and Country Resort
Chair: Ellen Moxham, Ph.D.
Mental Health Advocate Awardee: Barb Crew