

ON A MISSION: *To Catch the Bad Guys*



Math may not be 9-year-old Bita Habashi's favorite subject. But ask her how much it costs to catch a bad guy and she'll give you the exact amount: \$730.

That's the cost of a forensic sexual assault examination and evidence collection for a child brought to Northridge Hospital's **Children's Assault Treatment Services Center (CATS)**—the only 24-hour, 7-day-a-week program for victims of all ages who have experienced physical and sexual abuse in the San Fernando and Santa Clarita Valleys. It's also the amount Bita aimed to raise in 2005 when she first learned about CATS from a flyer posted at an Albertsons supermarket.

"When my daughter saw the flyer, she asked me why they needed money," remembers **Maryam Habashi**. "I told her because somebody hurt these children and CATS wants to help them."

During her first year as a "crime fighter," Bita carried a lunchbox with a cat pasted on the front and collected \$752 from friends, family and teachers. In 2006, she enlisted help from friend **Samantha Sanchez** and the pair collected \$1,250, which they personally donated to CATS at its annual Victory for Victims Walk/Run.

Those donations are greatly appreciated by CATS' expert team of forensic nurses who provide post-abuse/assault medical treatment, forensic interviews and evidence collection for more than 700 victims each year. In collaboration with law enforcement, child protective services and the District Attorney's Office, CATS serves as a safe port for children, women, and occasionally men during the traumatic hours after an assault. That's when forensic evidence and victim testimony must be recorded.

Unfortunately, about 90 percent of sexual assault victims never report the crime, often due to fear of embarrassment.

To put victims at ease, a high level of comfort begins the moment they enter CATS' soothing environment, which is decorated with plenty of stuffed animals and serene murals depicting flowers and sunshine. Victims are also provided a sense of privacy since officers, detectives and deputies observe recorded forensic interviews from a separate room via closed-circuit television.

What's more, examinations are not performed in Northridge Hospital's emergency room, but rather at a special CATS facility where trained experts treat victims away from the commotion

of medical emergencies. If needed, CATS experts will also travel to local ERs to perform assessments for victims, and will even coach medical professionals over the phone to properly collect evidence.

As the only Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) in the region, victims and their families can rest assured that they are receiving the highest level of evidence collection services. "Our nurses undergo continuous education and have handled about 1,000 cases each," says **Kathy Adams, BSN**, CATS Clinical Manager. "Their experience is an advantage to the victim and the justice system." In fact, the L.A. region is a nationwide leader in standardized evidence collection, which is crucial to "catching the bad guys."

"The entire CATS process, including the sexual assault exam, recorded interview and written documentation is essential in ensuring a successful prosecution," says **Mike Moore**, Los Angeles Police Department Deputy Chief.

While some victims may find solace knowing their abuser may be apprehended, they often need post-traumatic counseling provided by CATS community partner, the Valley Trauma Center.



Fabulous fundraiser
Bita Habashi



Bita Habashi (front) thanks Wells Fargo for supporting CATS while making a deposit at the Calabasas branch. **Edward Drake**, Vice President, Private Bank; **Omid Noori**, Branch Manager; and **Sherry Abdi**, Personal Banker (l-r).



Plans get underway for the 2007 CATS "Victory for Victims" Walk/Run. **Kim Roth**, Valley Trauma Center SART Coordinator; **Kathy Adams, BSN**, CATS Clinical Manager; **Mike Moore**, Los Angeles Police Department Deputy Chief; and **Rita Baer**, Valley Trauma Center Executive Director (l-r).

In addition to the **Valley Trauma Center's 24-hour crisis hotline (818-886-0453)**, it also provides a certified rape crisis advocate to CATS who counsels victims and their families, and will accompany victims to the police station, medical examinations and court procedures. "We believe CATS provides a valuable and important service to the community, and we are honored to partner with them to help sexual assault survivors," says **Rita Baer, MS**, Valley Trauma Center Executive Director.

In 2006, CATS helped 720 victims, but the hope is to decrease that number by preventing child abuse. That's why the Center educates professionals in the San Fernando Valley who work with children and are therefore mandated by law to report any reasonable suspicion of child abuse. The CATS team reaches more than 1,200 professionals annually by visiting public and private elementary schools, nursing schools, police stations, and local colleges where future social workers and teachers learn to recognize signs of abuse.

CATS has provided outreach efforts such as these to public and private schools, hospitals, clinics, and other community-based organizations in the San Fernando, Conejo and Santa Clarita Valleys since 1999. With continued support from community partners and residents like Rita, CATS will continue its mission for many years to come.

As for Rita, her goal is to eventually raise \$10,000 for CATS, and her philanthropic efforts have garnered her much praise. Last year she was honored with a \$6,000 scholarship from Kohl's Department Stores, \$1,000 of which she donated to CATS.

This year will mark the Fifth Annual "Victory for Victims" 5K/8K River Run & Walk to benefit CATS. The event will be held on **SUNDAY, APRIL 15**. For sponsorship or volunteer opportunities, please call **818-363-5035** or email victory4victims@aol.com.

Catching the Bad Guys, One Dollar at a Time

In 2006, CATS received more than \$250,000 thanks to the following donors:

- Albertsons
- Bloomingdales
- Bob's Big Boy in Burbank
- George & Lara Kalta, Consumers Choice Lighting
- Harman International
- John Laing Homes/JLH Mortgage
- Kiwanis Club, West San Fernando Valley
- Los Toros
- Mechanix Wear
- Panera Bread
- Sunair Children's Foundation
- The California Endowment
- Unicel
- UniHealth Foundation

If you would like to make a contribution, or join the CATS Meow Guild, please call 818-785-3489.



FREE WORKSHOPS

CATS can conduct a "Child Abuse Prevention—Mandated Reporting 101" workshop at your facility to review:

- Indicators of abuse
- Procedures for filing a report
- Protections afforded to mandated reporters

Call 818-785-3489 or 818-785-3523 for more information.