Susan Jacobs is at the wheel of a fast-track charitable organization

Susan Jacobs knows what it’s like to have to hitchhike. Years ago she walked out on an abusive relationship. Her car was later repossessed and she was forced to thumb it to work. Jacobs says her situation was bad but not dire – she was living with friends in a nice neighborhood and catching rides with “little old ladies.”

Around the same time, Jacobs met someone who owned a “buy here-pay here” car lot who offered her free use of a used car.

That’s Part One of how Jacobs came to create the non-profit Wheels of Success (WOS) in 2003.

Part Two came later when she was running a staffing company that specialized in filling hospitality positions and other low-level jobs. Finding the right job candidate wasn’t a problem, but finding the right one with reliable transportation was.

“They’d say ‘I can’t take that job, I can’t get there,’” Jacob recalls. Or, the employee would take the job and end up fired for being late or not showing up at all due to car troubles.

Couple those experiences with Jacobs’ involvement with the “Dress for Success” program and – bingo! – the idea for Wheels of Success was born.

An ever-developing idea for which just last September Jacobs was named by the cable network a “CNN Hero” and featured on Larry King Live.

Her Tampa Bay program supplies the “working poor” – those ineligible for government-assisted transportation programs – with reliable vehicles and/or car-care services so they can get to work. Not to mention getting their kids to school or simply shopping for groceries.

“We’re trying to keep people from falling through the cracks and ending up on welfare,” Jacobs says.

In its first year of operation, Wheels of Success gave away three vehicles, helping three families.

In 2004 Bill Currie Ford and AAA Auto Club South joined the Wheels of Success board, and a cooperative agreement was formed with The Spring of Tampa Bay and its transitional housing program.

In 2005, 22 vehicles were given out.

In 2006 the Caspers Company (McDonald’s franchise) became the first employer partner, and 45 vehicles were given out.

To date, Jacobs says, 325 cars have been given out and 625 services have been performed – via car repairs, licensing services or payment assistance.

“Our goal is to do two cars a week, or a minimum of 70 cars per year,” Jacobs says.

The region is a “hot spot” of transportation problems. Consider the statistics WOS has compiled:

- Tampa-St. Petersburg is the highest costing metropolitan area in the country for transportation costs;
40 percent of the working poor’s income is spent on transportation as opposed to 24.6 percent of the general population’s;

The bus system has inadequate routes and runs infrequently. That means parents who work until 5:00 p.m. and take the bus to pick up their children from daycare find it almost impossible to get there by the 6:00 p.m. deadline.

“You don’t know what it’s like here if you’re from Chicago or New York. How unsafe it is, how spread out,” Jacobs says.

Pay It Forward

Jacobs runs a lean operation where about 90 cents of every dollar goes back into the program. In a small office piled with paperwork and tucked inside Tampa’s nondescript Family Justice Center, she and one full-time assistant run the entire Wheels of Success program (www.wheelsofsuccess.org).

Part-time clerical help comes via clients who “buy” a car by donating three service hours a month to the organization. Clients also have to make monthly “car payments” for one year, based on their ability to pay. The payments average about $45 a month.

To qualify for the program and be given a car, clients must, among other criteria, “pay it forward” via car payments and volunteer hours; live in Hillsborough, Pinellas or Pasco counties; earn low-to-moderate incomes; be employed full-time or recently unemployed due to transportation issues; and be legal U.S. residents.

“Without any advertising for referrals we get at least 50 applications a month,” Jacobs says. Most of the used cars donated to Wheels of Success come from individuals.

WOS’s budget this year is $494,000. Of that, $200,000 is from in-kind donations. The cash budget’s profile is: 20 percent from public funds; 33 percent from earned income (events, car sales, client payments); 47 percent from private sources (grants and corporate/individual donations).

The Road Ahead

Jacobs hopes to expand Wheels of Success into Hernando, Sarasota and Manatee counties. Her plans have stalled a bit from higher demand and fewer donations. The government’s popular “Cash for Clunkers” program led to a drastic decline in car donations. In the meantime, demand for cars is up.

“What we see now are people who never needed help having their cars repossessed – mortgage brokers, Realtors. Their cars are repossessed and their credit is ruined,” she says.

Last year, though, Jacobs managed to kick off two pilot programs. The first, Vehicles for Veterans, has given out two cars with help from sponsors like Toyota of Tampa Bay and State Farm Auto Insurance Company. The second, Wheels to the Future, is for kids coming of age in the foster care system with no family standing by to help. A contribution from the Eckerd Family Foundation, partially matched by The Rotary Club of Tampa, made the program possible. Last May, the program placed its first teen in the driver’s seat of his newly painted Volvo. Jacobs hopes to award one car each month to a deserving youth moving on to a full-time job or college. So far the program has given out four cars and done one car repair.

Besides being a “CNN Hero”, Jacobs was also named a “Point of Light” in 2007 by the Points of Light Foundation. She says she’s now working on “franchising” her unique program model to other parts of the country, putting together fundraisers, applying for grants, looking for partnerships.

Her inspiration?

“I was raised by a handicapped single mom who collected for – and gave to – charity until she was 90,” Jacobs says. “I always knew I wanted to give back.”