

Leader who shaped child charities is retiring - Any Baby Can director Lila Carl's life was changed by a brief encounter with a deaf boy

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Lila Carl was a college English major intent on writing novels for the rest of her life when a little deaf boy changed everything.

In 1959, while attending college, Carl was working at the gift shop of the old Aquarena Springs Resort in San Marcos when a little red-headed boy came into the shop. He was deaf.

Even today, Carl, executive director of the Austin-based child resource center Any Baby Can, can't say exactly what it was about this boy that touched her so profoundly. But by the time he left the shop, Carl had decided to become a speech therapy major.

"He was just so cute and captured my heart," she said. "I decided right there I was going to spend the rest of my life working with handicapped children, and that's what I've done."

Over the past 21 years, Carl has helped transform the landscape of Austin nonprofits. She brought Easter Seals to Austin and was one of the state's first directors for early childhood intervention programs. She built Any Baby Can from a \$120,000-a-year charity into one with a \$3.4 million budget that serves 10,000 children a year.

Now she's retiring.

"It's going to be hard," Carl, 63, said. "This is my baby. It's hard to separate what you are with what you do. But I can't keep going until I drop."

Colleagues say Carl's dogged advocacy, passion and fund-raising skills make her a widely admired nonprofit leader.

"She's small in stature, but bigger than life," said Lee Manford, president of the Austin Area Human Services Association. "She's one of the rock stars in the nonprofit world."

Carl grew up in New Braunfels, the daughter of a teacher and a typewriter repair man. Her mother was an active churchgoer big on volunteer work, and Carl often tagged along. When her mother administered polio vaccinations

at a local school one day, Carl -- then a fourth grader -- spent hours swabbing arms.

Carl spent the first 20 years of her professional life as an educator and speech therapist in private and public schools. She got her master's degree in speech and language pathology from the University of Texas. In 1968, she created the Developmental Syntax Program, a curriculum for speech therapy teachers that remained in print until just this year.

Carl later earned her doctorate in special education from UT.

In 1983, she moved into the nonprofit world. She worked at the YMCA in Austin.

Then she became the executive director for the Capital Area Rehabilitation Center, a local nonprofit that helped disabled children.

Shortly after her arrival, she discovered the agency had financial problems, Carl said. She asked Easter Seals to take over the organization, and it did.

Carl remained with Easter Seals for six years. During that time, she ran one of the state's first early childhood intervention programs, a federally funded initiative that provides care for children 0 to 3.

A few more jobs came and went. In 1994, Carl became the first executive director for Any Baby Can.

The agency kicked off with three employees and a \$120,000 annual budget that served 135 people a year. Since then, Carl has overseen mergers between Any Baby Can and two local nonprofits: CEDEN Family Resource Center and Candlelighters Childhood Cancer Foundation.

Today, Any Baby Can has 70 employees and offers services including prenatal education, dropout prevention and adult literacy. Employees direct families to resources and medical care. The agency provides food and pays bills for families who need help.

"Any Baby Can is Lila's baby," said Susan Eason, executive director of the Arc of the Capital Area, who has known Carl for 15 years. "She made it what it is."

At first glance, Carl looks more like a second-grade teacher than a tough-minded business executive.

She stands 5-feet-2-inches tall and weighs 98 pounds. Her strawberry blonde hair brushes against her shoulders, and her voice is gentle from years of working with children.

But make her mad and you'll see another side.

In 2003, when legislators cut funding for human service agencies, Carl sent out two or three e-mails a day to hundreds of people, urging them to protest the move. When city leaders cut funding, she complained loudly.

That passion to protect the vulnerable often has powerful results, said Pete Yuan, board president for Any Baby Can. After meeting an elderly woman with no family, Carl visited the woman at her home several times a week. She brought her food and kept her company.

When the woman died, she left Any Baby Can \$150,000.

"Lila had touched her," Yuan said. "That's the kind of thing that just makes you say, 'Wow.' "

Carl officially retires Jan. 31 but will stay on part time for another six months to help her successor into the job. As of yet, no replacement has been named.

Though the agency will continue to thrive, Carl's passion will be missed, Yuan said.

"I'm not sure anyone will be able to come in and replace her in that respect," he said. "Her absence will be felt for years to come."

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