

Giving Back A Way Of Life For One Family

Written by William B. Macaulay

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For the past spent 18 years, Avis Richards and her family have travelled to their favorite winter escape to the beautiful island of Hawaii, but weekends in the summertime is reserved for the

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Hamptons where Avis and her family escape from their busy life to enjoy their home and the ocean air with their two children, Chloé and Dylan. Avis dedicates weekdays to helping others, giving back, whether it was via serving dinner in soup kitchens, or other community volunteering, and contributing as a board member to a myriad of social organizations.

Avis Richards has dedicated much of her life as a working philanthropist and early on realized that she had an inner drive to become more involved with charities she supported, in addition to writing checks and attending benefit galas. During a brainstorming session with her husband Bruce, her number one fan, the light bulb came on when Avis decided she could provide an essential element that many charities were desperately in need of, helping charities with their media campaign. All charities need to get their message out to raise awareness of the issue at-large and raise much-needed funds. Avis, which is Latin for “little bird” formed a foundation called Birds Nest, whose purpose is to partner with charities and provide programming through visual media such as short films and web-content. Birds Nest’s first partner was a North New Jersey school called St. Philips Academy. The director was in a bind about how to tell the story of the school’s needs in a creative way, in a way that would get the attention of people at a fundraising dinner event.

Avis, with prior experience having worked at a media production company, was able to naturally transition in to creating a short film to tell the school’s story. The Academy offered to scrape together the money to pay for it, but she explains, “We wanted to do this pro-bono as a way of giving back. And as a result, the film won a half a dozen awards and the school is thriving as a premier academic institution.” From this initial foray Birds Nest has also thrived as Avis’ vision continues to evolve.

“We are very proud of the work that we do, the partnerships that we have formed, and the impact that we make as we provide a valuable service, mostly free of charge working as a 501(c)3 non- profit. Since inception, for the past seven years I have decided not to take a salary as my work is purely philanthropic. We have brought together hard working professionals and talented people who are equally passionate about helping others. These professionals donate

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their time and talent to help us produce each project.”

Avis has also built an outstanding year round internship program for aspiring media professionals. “Our students, through shooting, directing, producing, and writing learn the importance of telling our non-profit partner’s stories on multiple platforms of social media (i.e.: Youtube, Twitter), our blogs, and websites.” Most non-profits, as Richards explains, have no budget for media content. “In today’s fast paced world driven by social media, and short films, video content is needed to spread the word. Birds Nest programs provide content and creativity to educate our community to improve education, healthcare, and social issues at-large.”

Avis’ latest foray has led to a documentary about educating the public on how to improve their health through nutrition and exercise: The Lunch Movement. Avis recruited her son to help out too. Dylan, only 14 at the time began a project to review farm to fork, raw or vegan, and sustainable restaurants to educate New Yorkers on making healthier dining choices. Dylan, a foodie in his own right, worked hard during the summers and refined his own ideas about food quality, sustainable agriculture, and organic restaurants. Now 18 years of age, Dylan has proven himself to be a match for his mother’s enthusiasm for philanthropy by creating Dylan’s Lunchbox a documentary television program that has won three Emmy nominations. He is the author of an upcoming book to be released by Random House and Hatherleigh Press titled The Growing Athlete, which showcases how to eat smart and train safely, especially for teens on and off the field.

One thing seems to lead to another with this family of philanthropists. Out of Dylan’s Lunchbox came the impetus for growing wholesome food and as Avis commented, “Education starts from the ground up.” This program aptly named The Ground Up Campaign, literally aims to teach kids and schools about the joys of growing their own food. The idea is to partner with the schools, the school cafeterias, and curriculum that incorporate how to grow and how to prepare meals from what the students have grown on their own. There are now 250 indoor nutrition education gardens in schools across the country and some ten thousand plus inner city kids who have been exposed to something of lasting value and of healthy benefit.

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So when does this vivacious and driven wife, mother, and giver to the max, take time for herself ? “Not very often,” came the quick response, but when she does, her favorite things are spending time with her mother who is now 97 years young, planting/ harvesting her Southampton vegetable garden, taking a quiet stroll on the beach with her husband and their two dogs, and sauntering through an art gallery or museum with her kids. As Avis continues to develop her vision for the future she knows that philanthropy will be the centerpiece of her work and provide a lasting example for her children. Avis’ daughter, Chloé, who works at a famed talent agency, recently decided to join the board of Birds Nest Foundation, while her son who is off for college in the fall maintains a passion for philanthropy. Avis legacy will surely be passed on to the next generation allowing, as she states, “ We give every charity a voice.”

-E.J. Webber