

People in Need Have a Friend in Bernadette Griggs

SOCIAL SERVICES: CFO With Jewish Family Service Oversaw Agency's Budget Growth

■ By BRAD GRAVES

Bernadette Griggs, chief financial officer of **Jewish Family Service of San Diego (JFS)**, is this year's CFO of the Year in the Nonprofit Organization category.

Griggs came to the United States as a young girl, from a community without lights and running water in Belize (the Central American country previously known as British Honduras).

Her focus, she said, is solving issues bigger than her.

For 33 years she worked in public schools and community colleges, notably the Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College District, Southwestern Community College District, Los Angeles County Office of Education and Pasadena Unified School District.

She then pivoted to serve vulnerable populations in San Diego County. Joining JFS in 2018, she oversaw the growth of an operating budget from \$24 million to \$86 million. The budget doubled during the last year.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, JFS adapted, revised and expanded its services to focus on what was needed most and provide critical assistance to those in crisis – whether they needed food to feed their families, were starting new lives in the United States, or were looking for a safe place to sleep. Griggs' leadership was critical during this time, helping JFS access all available programs and funds needed to ensure JFS could continue to exercise its mission.

Part of her work during the coronavirus outbreak was arranging for a \$2.96 million Paycheck Protection Program loan. Griggs then arranged for it to be forgiven.

"That was a lot of work," she said, recounting her experience before several other CFOs and judges during an event on Feb. 8,



Photo courtesy of Bob Hoffman

Bernadette Griggs
Chief Financial Officer
Jewish Family Service of San Diego

Griggs is the chair of the CFO cohort for the **Network of Jewish Human Services Agencies (NJHSA)**, an international membership association that serves more than 150 nonprofit

human service agencies in the United States, Canada and Israel.

She also serves as an adviser to the board of **Optimist Club International**, Belize Branch, an international volunteer organization that values all children and helps them develop to their full potential. Through Optimist International, she continues to sponsor an entrepreneurship program in elementary schools in the southern region of the country of Belize. Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, she donated laptops and tablets to equip classrooms and students in Belize to help them stay current with class requirements.

She is a board member of a charter school where she is serving in the position of past president since she was the president of the board for several years. She is the past treasurer of the Trustee Board at **Mount Moriah Christian Church** and **Macedonia Church of Christ**. She often volunteers at **Mount Moriah's** food pantry, a **San Diego Food Bank** distribution location, assisting the community and families experiencing food insecurity.

After receiving her award, Griggs took some time to answer a few questions from the San Diego Business Journal.

Q: At what stage in your life did you set your sights on the CFO's office? What put you on the path to getting there?

A: About midway through my career, I realized if I wanted to make a difference in my community, I needed to be in a

position of influence as both a policymaker and decision maker. For several years, I chaired a charter school board, influencing policies around dropout recovery and giving students much-needed second chances. That is when I knew I wanted to do more and become even more influential in the positions I chose to take. Growing up as young girl in Hopkins, Belize, I knew nothing about becoming a CFO, but I always knew I wanted to be an accountant.

Q: Think back over your career. Up to this point, what is the accomplishment you are most proud of?

A: I am most proud of the trajectory of my career that started as an account clerk, the most entry-level position in the accounting field, to becoming an associate vice chancellor of business for a community college. I served as assistant superintendent/chief business officer for a K-12 school district before transitioning to the nonprofit sector as CFO. To be recognized as CFO of the Year for my work with JFS is a special highlight among these accomplishments. I knew education was key to upward mobility, therefore, obtaining a master's degree in financial management definitely played a huge role in my success.

Q: Of all the economics and business issues in the news right now, what are you following with most interest and why?

A: Currently, inflation is arguably the biggest concern for JFS's clients of all backgrounds, faiths and ages. Inflation is significantly impacting everything we need to live, including housing, food, transportation, childcare, healthcare, and medicine, that is becoming less and less affordable by the day! These rising costs can potentially drive more people into homelessness, and it makes us at JFS all that much more concerned for our clients and focused on providing as much help as we can in these high-impact areas.

Q: Which one most directly affects your organization?

A: From a revenue perspective, we are watching how the economy is impacting government funders, such as the anticipated multi-billion-dollar deficit at the state level. We are planning accordingly for these changes along with the end of COVID-related funding. Also on the revenue side, the volatile stock market impacts our donors and investments.

Internally, finding terrific staff, meeting their needs for flexibility and their ability to find affordable childcare have become conditions we are always trying to address.

Q: What is the next big step your organization hopes to take? If appropriate, tell me what challenges you face in getting there.

A: Addressing the severe shortage of affordable housing in our region is a primary interest to JFS. We have a board task force researching how we might meet some housing needs of older adults and young families who are often squeezed by increasing rental costs.

We are excited about exploring ways technology can help us better meet the needs of the people we serve. For example, last year we launched an app now used to schedule a curbside pickup from our client-choice food pantry. This saves precious time for many people juggling multiple jobs while trying to make ends meet. ■

A Steady Partner

As chief financial officer, Griggs oversees the fiscal integrity of JFS and Charitable Adult Rides & Services (CARS). She helps the 105-year-old JFS fulfill its mission to serve vulnerable populations including the unhoused, immigrants, seniors and families. Through the rapid growth, Griggs has been a steady partner to the CEO, COO and CDO, along with the JFS board of directors to create and maintain the systems necessary to ensure the organization's fiscal strength was supported.

Some 72% of the budget is government funds; Griggs said she keeps track of 220 different pots of money.

JFS has been awarded four stars by Charity Navigator for 14 years. With Griggs' strategic planning, JFS is among the less than 1% of the thousands of charities evaluated that have been awarded this recognition continuously for more than a decade.

More Than a Million Meals

Under Griggs' watchful eye, JFS continues to be one of the most effective and impactful nonprofits in San Diego, serving more than 70,000 people of all ages and backgrounds each year. Results from the last year include:

- 1,264,222 meals delivered to homebound older adults and distributed to other San Diegans through JFS drive-through food distribution services;
- 18,939 rides provided to older adults for needs such as doctor's appointments and grocery shopping through JFS's "On the Go" program;
- 1,115 people experiencing homelessness provided with a safe space to sleep in their cars for the night, along with case managers and specialists to help them move into more stable housing through the JFS Safe Parking Program;
- 24,000 asylum seekers provided with respite shelter services, financial and travel assistance and legal support.
- 150 low-income families provided with direct monthly cash payments as part of San Diego's first Guaranteed Income Project.

Degrees From SDSU, NU

Griggs earned a bachelor's degree in business administration/accounting from **San Diego State University** and a master's degree in business administration/financial management from **National University**. She also pursued and successfully obtained certification from the **California Association of School Business Officials** for Chief Business Officers. The certification required intense training in strategic leadership, business processes, change management, organizational strategies, business effectiveness and efficiencies and implementation of strategies in real work experiences with outcomes.



Members of the JFS finance and accounting team include Manny Garcia (left), Ilona Sokolinsky, Dana Toppel, Bernadette Griggs, Lisa Bruner, Nate Nash and Jackie Balgnot. The group is pictured in the JFS main campus client-choice food pantry, where the community comes to access a wide variety of free, nutritious food options. Photo courtesy of Jewish Family Service of San Diego