



UT \* MAKING A DIFFERENCE



Rady Children's Hospital volunteer Tom Sandler gives a high-five to Logan Kubiak, 4, while making snowmen this month. Sandler volunteers weekly in the oncology playroom, where he helps with puzzles, plays board games and supervises projects. JOHN GASTALDO - U-T

## Helping hand reaches out for sick children



**KARLA PETERSON**

In his 20 years of giving back to San Diego, Tom Sandler has raised puppies for Canine Companions for Independence and volunteered in the playroom at Rady Children's Hospital. He has helped his Rotary Club give money away, donated his picture frames and framing services to local nonprofits and begun gently

schooling his grandchildren in the joys of philanthropy. He has also had plenty of time to refine his compassion credo, which can be summed up thusly: Ask not what volunteering can do for you, ask what in the world you would do without volunteering. "It's funny to look back on my life when I didn't have this stuff, and it seems so strange," said Sandler, 70. "I look at it and I think, 'What did I do with myself?'" That's how hugely important it has become.

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Sandler came to San Diego in 1980 to work at the Fine Arts Store framing and art-supply outlet in Mission Hills, which was housed in a quirky little building modeled after the Aerospace Museum in Balboa Park. One year later, the chain closed the Mission Hills store, and Sandler took over the business. He renamed it the Frame Station, and began working to make his adopted city feel like home. He and his wife, Sandra Thiederman, raised their

two girls in Talmadge, and the Frame Station became the kind of place where patrons could chart the progress of their lives through the handiwork of Sandler and his staff. "We have been very, very fortunate to have such a great neighborhood and such great clients," Sandler said, looking around his small, colorful shop. "We frame their infant pictures, and 20 years later, we're framing their diplomas." But as Sandler's daughters

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## DIFFERENCE • Volunteer seen as 'grandfather figure'

**FROM A1** grew up and moved out, he became antsy. He missed having kids around the house, and even his homey shop and friendly customers weren't enough to fill the gap. In 1994, Thiederman suggested he look into getting his kid fix through volunteering. Sandler's first stop was Rady Children's Hospital and a volunteer gig that did not feel like the perfect fit. At least not at first. "I was surprised by my reactions and the kind of worries I had. I felt very apprehensive about being around sick kids," Sandler said of his first Friday-afternoon stint in the hospital's orthopedic-rehab playroom. "But I remember walking through the halls and inviting kids to come in and play, and there was this little girl there, and she kept saying, 'I'm going to the playroom, I'm going to the playroom,' and her eyes were so bright and alive and she was so excited. And I remember thinking, 'You can't beat that.'" Now, Sandler volunteers weekly in the oncology playroom, where he helps with puzzles, plays board games, supervises arts-and-crafts and assists in Lego projects. He brings games and toys to the children who can't leave their rooms, and he'll read or watch TV with the ones who need to rest. The gestures aren't big, but the impact is sizable.

"Tom is very warm and easy to approach. The kids love to interact with him. He's almost like a grandfather figure," said Mariemel Gawaran, child-life assistant for Rady Children's hematology-oncology unit. "Being able to help our patients be happy in the moment helps them forget about being sick. When they come into the playroom, things start to change." Another thing Sandler discovered about volunteering is that a little usually leads to a little bit more, and suddenly, you are all in. In 2000, Sandler joined the Old Mission Rotary Club, where he has been an enthusiastic participant in the organization's annual Rotary Youth Leadership Awards. He also has been active in his club's Art Pratt Foundation, which has given grants to such local nonprofits as the Becky's House Domestic Violence Program and the Ronald McDonald House Charities. And for the last 15-plus years, Sandler and Thiederman have been raising puppies for Canine Companions for Independence, a national nonprofit that provides assistance dogs to people with disabilities. Their ninth CCI puppy, a yellow Lab named Tilly, is a regular presence at the Frame Station, where customers ask for her by name and are crushed when she isn't there. Over the years, the couple have also gotten into the habit of taking their puppies to local elementary schools to teach students about people with disabilities and how the dogs learn to help. The Frame Station also donates frames and framing services to the Alzheimer's Association and to St. Madeleine Sophie's Center for mentally challenged adults. And every year about this time, Sandler and Thiederman give their five grandchildren \$10 each to donate to the charity of their choice. It's a small price to pay for the start of an invaluable relationship. "I really like giving. It just makes you feel good about yourself," Sandler said, as Tilly stirred in the store's backroom. "So many people don't know that. They get in a funk and they eat ice cream or something. But this really works."

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