

# The best day of their lives

By [Andrea Ruse](#) | July 14th, 2010 |



A Day at the Beach volunteer teaches the child he “adopted for a day” to boogie board.

Photo courtesy of the P.S. I Love You Foundation

Patricia Jones sits down at her kitchen table, which is littered with dozens of photographs arranged haphazardly under its glass top.

She searches carefully over each picture, tracing her finger across the table.

“Where is it?” Jones wonders aloud, while a blue-eyed toddler with tight blond curls runs in from the backyard followed by a dark haired girl at least a year younger.

Neither child resembles Jones — nor each other, for that matter — but it is clear she is their mother. She excuses herself to attend to the kids, and then returns to search among the images of family, friends, children and volunteers from the P.S. I Love You Foundation, which she founded in 1998.

In June, PSILYF celebrated its 10th anniversary of providing educational and motivational programs to thousands of at-risk kids throughout Los Angeles County.

Next Saturday, July 24, PSILYF will host its 10th annual Day at the Beach in Manhattan Beach. Over 250 inner city kids will be paired with adult volunteers who “adopt a child for a day” of surfing, games, face painting, music, food and friendship.

Jones, 46, finally finds the photo she is looking for and plucks it from underneath the glass table top.

It shows a striking, blond white woman — Jones — standing on a porch with her arms around four smiling black children ranging from one to 10 years old. The photo was taken more than 10 years ago.

Her eyes shine as she names and points to each child as if talking about family.

“This is it,” she says. “This is where it all began.”

### **A day at the beach**

In 1999, Manhattan Beach Mayor Pro Tem Richard Montgomery adopted a child.

For a day, that is.



Two boys from L.A.'s inner cities show off their face paint and game medals at last year's Day at the Beach.

During PSILYF's first annual Day at the Beach, Montgomery was paired with one of 15 at-risk children and spent the day shadowing a boy he taught to boogie board and body surf.

“It was a blast,” Montgomery recalled. “Lots of these kids have never even been to the beach.”

Montgomery received a letter a few weeks later from the boy thanking him for the experience.

“It's a long day and you're probably more worn out than they are,” Montgomery said. “Their motors never stopped. But no matter how tired you are, when they say ‘Thank you’ at the end, it makes it all worth it.”

The idea stemmed from the family in the photo Jones keeps tucked in her kitchen table.

By 1996, Jones had spent a decade earning a lucrative salary as a medical sales rep. She owned a condo in Hermosa Beach and was on the verge of another promotion.

During a sales call to a hospital she had visited for 10 years, she learned that long-time employee Millie Taylor — with whom Jones had become well-acquainted — no longer worked there. No one could tell Jones why Taylor had left.

“After 35 years at the hospital, nobody there even knew what had happened to her,” Jones says.



Millie Taylor and Jeff Jones. Photo courtesy of the P.S. I Love You Foundation

She asked for Taylor’s phone number and made a call. Jones learned that Taylor’s daughter and granddaughter were both serving prison sentences for a crime they committed together, leaving behind a grandson, age 10, and three great-grandchildren, ages three, two and one.

“She had to quit to take care of four kids, with no time for a job,” Jones says. “But she was doing it. I thought, ‘If she could do something so grand with her life, then what am I doing?’”

Immediately, Jones drove to Taylor’s North Long Beach address. She started taking the kids three nights a week into her home to give Taylor some relief. She also started subsidizing their rent, food and medical bills.

Word spread quickly of Jones’ generosity and soon letters came in from various organizations requesting money for causes. Jones began to organize support from friends.

“At our first board meeting, 10 of my friends showed up,” she says. “At our second board meeting, none came back. But 10 new ones came. Everybody has a different passion. You just have to find what yours is.”

## **Imprints**

By 1998, Jones and a growing number of volunteers established PSILYF as a non-profit organization. The

name “P.S. I Love You” was chosen as a tribute to Jones’ mom who always wrote the phrase on lunch bags Jones took to school during her childhood in Connecticut.

While developing new programs, Jones remained involved in the lives of Taylor and her grandkids. She learned that the kids didn’t know what some simple things were, including broccoli and yogurt. She was prompted to hold the first Day at the Beach after finding out that none of the kids had seen the ocean, though all were raised in Long Beach. Jones invited an additional 11 children from a shelter.

“We thought, ‘If [Taylor’s grandkids] haven’t seen the ocean, maybe there are other kids who haven’t seen it either,’” she says.

Within a few years, the event became so popular that attendance reached 250 kids and 320 adult volunteers.

“At that point, the city said, ‘No more kids,’” Jones says.

Each child arrives to Day at the Beach knowing that an adult is waiting to spend the day with him or her. Volunteers and kids play in the ocean, get buried in the sand, paint faces and compete in games, including a popular three-legged race.

The event is funded through private donations and corporate sponsorships. Larry Miller, owner of Sit ‘N Sleep Mattress Store, partially sponsors the event each year and personally adopts a child. Kanoa Aquatics provides free surf lessons every year, while Massage Spot offers kids’ massages and Fresh Brothers Pizza provides food for the event.



Day at the Beach volunteer Monika gives her kid one of the many toys donated for the event. Photo courtesy of the P.S. I Love You Foundation

At the end of the day, each child goes home with a boogie board, a new beach towel and a T-shirt. Jones hopes that each has also made a new friend and positive memories to compete with often painful ones.

“There is a connection lacking in families today,” Jones says. “It’s not a lack of love, but parents are in survival mode in the inner cities.”

She described a letter written by volunteer Richard McConnell after he participated in the event.

“He said that at one point, his kid looked up at him and said, ‘This is the greatest day of my life,’” Jones recalls. “Then [McConnell] said he realized, ‘This is the greatest day of my life too.’”

By 2000, PSILYF had developed several educational programs and community events aimed at teaching love, respect and tolerance to at-risk youth.

“You knew in this mentoring, you could help mold them,” Jones says. “Like an imprint on play dough.”

Jones removes another photograph from underneath the glass. It shows a man in his early twenties, an older version of Taylor’s grandson who was 10 years old when his mom went to prison.

“This is Christopher,” she says proudly.



(Left to right) Jeff Jones, Xabu, Connor Jones, Patricia Jones, Jermain, an unidentified family member, Christopher, and Sean. Christopher is the grandson of Millie Taylor. Xabu, Jermain, and Sean are her great-grandchildren.

When Christopher’s grandmother Millie died several months after Jones married in 2001, he moved into the home of Jones and her husband, Jeff, and attended Redondo Union High School.

“This six-foot-two black kid took over the baby room at 16 years old,” Jones laughs.

After Christopher graduated, he continued living with the Jones family for a few years and attended college.

“He basically runs Day at the Beach now,” Jones says.

In 2007, PSILYF hosted an event called Princess for a Day, where volunteers met with seven at-risk high school girls and helped them get ready for prom.

When the girls asked Jones whether she planned to have children, she casually replied that she might adopt. Within the next couple years, Jones and her husband adopted their first child, a boy.

Two and half years after the Princess for a Day event, Jones received an unexpected call from one of the girls.

“First she asked if I remembered her,” Jones recalls. “Then she said, ‘Did you really mean what you said about wanting to adopt? Because I’m pregnant.’”

### **Dear Oprah**

Several months later, Jones and her husband added to their diverse, extensive and ever-growing family by adopting a baby girl from the student she met at the PSILYF event.

When Jones reflects on all that’s happened since the day she discovered that Taylor had stopped working at the hospital, the chain of events seems to somehow make strange sense, much like the random arrangement of photos under the glass table.

“I don’t know how I got into medical sales,” she says. “But now I know why I was there.”



Day at the Beach kids and volunteers take a moments’ rest from playing beach games.

In addition to community events, PSILYF provides three state-aligned, 12-week courses focusing on principles of self-acceptance and awareness, leadership and teamwork and tolerance of others through yoga, sports, geography and history programs. Volunteers are trained by Jones to teach courses, mostly at Title One elementary schools and shelters.

The classes incorporate journaling, mood cards and positive mantras to give kids healthy ways to express emotions they often struggle with.

One class wrote letters to “The Oprah Winfrey Show” about how much they learned from the yoga course.

“If you take the class, you’ll know what I mean,” read one boy’s letter. “Speaking of mean, I haven’t been mean since I started taking this class.”

In a sports class, an autistic student who became angry and didn’t want to participate learned to be more comfortable with himself by the course’s end.

“I learned the most important thing is to never say ‘I can’t’ because you can do anything,” Jones recalls him telling the class.

“Every kid wants that peace and calmness,” she adds.

The programs are funded through donations and grants. U.S. Auto Parts provided a \$25,000 last December.

The corporation’s CEO, Shane Evangelist, teamed up with PSILYF this year start a program that will allow U.S. Auto Parts employees at the company’s Carson headquarters to spend a couple hours every other week mentoring children in schools on company time. Employees will be able to teach company-sponsored yoga classes or offer one-on-one mentoring during students’ lunch breaks in a program called “Love for Lunch.” The company also plans to offer a high school internship program at U.S. Auto Parts to at-risk youth in Carson through PSILYF.

“I wanted to help my employees by giving them an opportunity to give back,” Evangelist said. “Most families that work have kids at home and simply don’t have the time to volunteer when they are not at work. This way, they can give back without taking time away from their own families.”

The company will assess the program by tracking student behaviors, grades, and school attendance, as well as employee happiness and productivity.

“These programs will let kids know that someone else cares, while improving their self-worth,” Evangelist said. “They will also give our employees a higher sense of worth by giving them the opportunity to give back to the city we work in. I think that will make them happier and more productive, allowing us in turn to have higher employee retention. It’s a win-win for everybody.”

If successful, Evangelist wants to work with PSILYF to bring the program to other communities.

Jones walks upstairs to retrieve one of the many letters mailed to PSILYF from kids, volunteers, teachers, parents and shelter employees. It is from the executive director of a shelter who took a group of kids to last year’s Day at the Beach.

“The following week after this amazing event, one of our families was moving into their new home,” the letter read. “We always sit down with each family just before they leave and this time, the older boy asked us to guess what we thought he would be when he grew up. After several incorrect guesses, he announced, ‘When I grow up, I want to train to be a P.S. I Love You volunteer.’”

*This year’s Day at the Beach will be held from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. between Sixth and Ninth streets in Manhattan Beach. Registration to adopt a child is closed. To register for the waiting list or as a staff volunteer, contact Patti Nernberg at (310) 806-1965 or at [ezhangin@yahoo.com](mailto:ezhangin@yahoo.com). For more information or to make a donation, visit [www.psiloveyoufoudnation.org](http://www.psiloveyoufoudnation.org). All proceeds go directly to fund PSILYF programs and events. ER*