

Introducing Judy Murdaugh-Jackson, 2017 Theresa Award Honoree.

This year's winner of the Spirit of Theresa Award has been there from the beginning. Actually, Judy Murdaugh-Jackson has been there from before the beginning.

Judy and Susan Russo met in New York, even before Susan married Vincent, and well before Theresa began her short life. Reflecting on their meeting at a modeling agency 37 years ago, she remembers, "We were two professional young women trying to make it in the big city, and bonded almost instantly."



"I was there in the hospital providing support, when Theresa was born and I was part of the Foundation even before we knew exactly what we wanted to do, to remember her and help other families in need," she adds.

"Children with disabilities just see life differently, but they make you a better person, by allowing you to see life from their perspective," she notes.

Judy, who has two grown children, says that the most frequent question she gets is simply why she is so committed to the cause. "People say, you have two beautiful children, why do you spend all this time helping families of children with special needs? But really, after seeing what these families go through, and what they have to deal with, it's satisfying to provide some help."

For Judy, who quickly points out her name is not the shortened form of Judith, the work is more than just volunteer job, "I think it's a matter of helping to provide some respect to the children. Their needs are just different."

"I don't think people dealing with special needs children see it as an ordeal, they just see it as what they need to do, and I think they are special just to be able to deal with it every day."

As a long-time volunteer and Theresa Foundation board member, Judy says she finds tremendous satisfaction both in helping to coordinate the fund raising events and reviewing the grant proposals submitted each year.

"I love working on the bowling parties and golf tournaments, and soliciting businesses who generously donate to make the events successful, but I also get to help review the groups we fund and see what programs they provide." She adds, "I know the money is going to the right place and that the children and their families are benefitting from the funds we raise."

The Theresa Foundation is not the only group which has taken advantage of Judy's organizational talents. While her children were in school, she was an active PTA member in Long Beach, NY, serving as co-president and she has been part of the community's "morning madness" program providing a safe environment for high school students the morning after the prom.

For the past three years Judy, has worked with the Long Beach Latino Civic Association on their annual Gala during Hispanic Heritage month. And for many years she was on The Long Beach NAACP "Back to School Rally" committee which honors African and Hispanic – American children who excel in school.

Of course, she does all this while working full-time and raising her two children. This year she has the extra job of helping to plan her daughter's destination wedding.

She is also quick to credit her supportive husband, Wayne, who was often left home with the kids while she was out at all those meetings. They will celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary in September.

But she through it all she remains, 'Just Judy' providing strength and support to the Russo's and the hundreds of other families raising disabled children.

"I think God makes you special by giving you a child that needs extra care, but I think it makes these people special, because they have to deal with it constantly. It's not horrible, it's just different, and they deserve to get our support."