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The Vancouver charity Cause We Care supports single mothers with food security, financial independence, and more.

ALMOST 20 YEARS AGO, ANDREA THOMAS Hill was sitting around the kitchen table at her West Side home with a group of friends. These were all women, she says, who recognized how difficult motherhood would be without the resources, partners, and family support they were all lucky enough to have. They had come together to discuss how they could meaningfully give back, and from that discussion, Cause We Care was born.

Almost two decades later, what started off as a small holiday hamper drive has grown into a foundation that has distributed more than 11,000 community care packages directly to single moms and their kids and more than \$5 million in donations to front-line community programs that support single mothers. Its annual holiday drive sees 1,200 care packages distributed in Herschel backpacks, full of items such as mittens, a \$100 Save-On-Foods gift card, necessities, and treats to about 40 organizations in Greater Vancouver.

In the boardroom at Aritzia headquarters in Raintown, Hill (who is married to the fashion retailer's founder, Brian Hill) reflects on a legacy of supporting single mothers in the city, and on how far both she and her foundation have come. Her own children are now adults. And her charity has blossomed into a force that aims to give away a million dollars this year alone.

"We wanted to reach the single moms who are trying to raise their children, fleeing domestic violence, or dealing with an absentee father," she says. "Many people underestimate the impact we can have. There are certain causes people feel are worthy of large donations, and helping a single mom usually doesn't make it to the top five."

Hill is a passionate force who has brought many women in the city together to raise money for the organization in a variety of ways, including purchasing bracelets at Blue Ruby

(Hill's sister-in-law's company) around Mother's Day, with proceeds going to Cause We Care. Of the foundation's many corporate sponsors, Aritzia has been consistently supportive since the charity was officially registered in 2010, providing financial and product donations. Other sponsors, including Herschel Supply Co. and The Cross, have also provided significant support.

Today, Cause We Care raises money and evaluates and invests in organizations that provide single mothers with housing, child care, education, counselling, employment, food security, and essential supplies. The Hills recently upped their contribution, guaranteeing that 100 per cent of each dollar goes to recipients.

In addition to the annual Mother's Day campaign and Christmas holiday drive, the foundation funds the YWCA Cause We Care House, which provides shelter and support to 21 single mothers and their children in the Downtown Eastside.

One of the reasons she started the foundation, Hill explains, was her concerns about the disturbing scenes she witnessed in the Downtown Eastside, where she regularly went to see her husband at his office. "This was 25 years ago. It's way worse now," she says. She had just moved to Vancouver from Toronto, and she remembers wondering how the mothers she was seeing were managing without resources, families, or partners, when she was struggling with just the isolation of being in a new city without family.

Cause We Care was not Hill's first foray into charitable fundraising: in her early 20s in Toronto, she set up the Run for the Cure in that city, propelled by her grandmother's experience with breast cancer and her ultimate death from the disease. "I felt there was a need to generate awareness," she notes. "My grandmother and



"You give us your money, and we will ensure it has an impact." —Andrea Thomas Hill



*Andrea Thomas Hill and beneficiary Moyosola at a Cause We Care Mother's Day event in 2022.
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friends' mothers were getting diagnosed with breast cancer, and no one was talking about it and it was this big secret."

Cause We Care has gained momentum over the years as it has worked to address worsening economic, systemic, and sociocultural pressures that affect single mothers. When, for example, Hill noticed a growing subsection of women who had addressed their trauma but needed help accessing higher education to become economically independent, she launched the Single Mothers Support Fund in 2019. Now, Universities Canada helps vet and accept applications to support women seeking help with child care, groceries, computers, or tutoring.

When the new fund launched, there were 20 to 30 applications per year. That number has grown to hundreds. The applicants, who receive up to \$10,000, often attend community college or university, studying accounting, nursing, education, or computer science. "The women have really inspiring career and education goals and yet in many cases the most traumatic backgrounds," Hill says. "The resilience and strength of these women are remarkable. And for

many of them, they always say, I want to make a better life for my kids. Often, Cause We Care is the make or break in terms of helping them fulfill their career aspirations."

It certainly was for Vivian. The single mother (who requested her last name be protected) had taught and managed schools in Nigeria for 13 years before fleeing an abusive relationship and landing in Vancouver with her two young daughters in 2019. Vancouver Rape Relief connected her with Cause We Care after she expressed an interest in becoming financially independent and going back to school.

Awarded a \$10,000 grant, Vivian, who already had an agricultural engineering degree and a master's in education from Nigeria, used those funds to cover her expenses while studying in an accelerated nursing program.

She is now working full time and feeling confident about her future: "Now I have a better life. I'm financially independent and able to raise my daughters and teach them to be strong and self-reliant. It's been a difficult journey, but my determination to succeed and the scholarship has helped me, and others, stand on our own

and do better for ourselves, our families, and our community."

Hill recognizes not all women are ready to go to school or to work: "Some just require different kinds of support." She likens the role of the foundation now to an "investment adviser for people who want to invest in a single mom.

"You give us your money, and we will ensure it has an impact," she says.

She notes that Cause We Care is now trying to generate more interest and support from the corporate sector. "We're at a pivotal point in our growth. We have been, for many years, talking to this small group of people who knew us from a personal perspective, coming to events or volunteering to do the hampers. But we're growing now, and we're doing more advocacy for the moms and trying to highlight the problem a little bit better.

"There's so many important causes," she adds. "It's just really important to understand that if you change a single mother's life, you're changing the life of the child, too. It's a two for one."

—Cori Howard