

## Society Scene by Kelly Bennett

Exclusively for the Ladera Ranch News



# PROJECT ACCESS GALA GOES OVER THE RAINBOW RAISES \$284,000

Amid the colorful characters and images of the magical Emerald City from the beloved movie, The Wizard of Oz, nonprofit Project Access recently marked its 20th anniversary at a fund-raising gala themed, "There's no place like home."

The event earned more than \$284,000 to support vital on-site health, education, and employment services provided by Project Access to low-income families, children, and seniors. Project Access' first resource center opened in Santa Ana in 1999, and since then, its presence has grown to over 70 communities across the nation. By 2020, Project Access anticipates serving over 20,000 individuals.

From the moment of arrival where guests checked in surrounded by farm-related props depicting Kansas, including a windmill, checkered tablecloths, and even a section of Dorothy's farmhouse with the stockings and ruby red slippers of the Wicked Witch of the East protruding out, they were immersed in the The Wizard of Oz themed event. Shades of green and gold were prevalent in the color scheme; guests were invited to be photographed with the Good and Bad Witches in front of a rainbow backdrop.

A cocktail reception and silent auction began the evening, with a pouring of white and sparkling wine. A room filled with balloons offered the perfect place for social media posts. Following this reception, guests were invited to follow movie characters Dorothy, Tin Man, Lion and Scarecrow along a yellow brick road projected on the floor into the Emerald City ballroom for the main party. Walls were bathed in lush green tones and video projections of poppy fields and other imagery from the movie appeared on sidewalls.

The event commemorated the 20th anniversary of nonprofit Project Access. Guests included Board members, sponsors, staff and others who wanted to mark this auspicious occasion in the history of the organization. A staircase included a timeline with significant dates in the history of the organization on each stair tread and guests were asked to stand on the step of the year they became involved to be photographed.

The program started, Project Access CEO and President Kristin Byrnes address the crowd and cited the organization's history and addressed what the future holds for the resident-based services provided by the nonprofit that will help stabilize and strengthen a growing number of communities.

She noted that demand for affordable and workforce housing will only increase as the population of low-income renters rises and so will the need for resident based services. If they didn't have a place to go to after school like a Project Access Resource Center, more than half of the nation's low-income youth would be more involved with drugs, alcohol, violence, and would not see college as an option. She thanked the organization's developer partners and acknowledged Project Access founders Jonathan B. Webb and Bill Hirsch, both of Affordable Housing Access, Inc., along with its volunteer board of directors and advisory board.

Dinner was served and guests enjoyed a duet entree include Atlantic salmon with lemon-scented melted tomato tarragon sauce, and hanger steak served with romesco sauce and parsley almond gremolata.

A bidding war started with the live auction where unique items were up for grabs. Folks battled for Angels tickets and batting practice, a Utah ski week with hotel and ski passes, a Pedego bike, and a Palm Springs weekend stay with golf.

Then, the after party began with a lively song and dance number performed by the movie characters and included dancing, cocktails and dessert. Late night bites included tater tots, Cali mini sliders, torta pelona - with shredded prime beef, avocado, cream, pickled jalapeño peppers and lettuce - plush caterer signature 24 Carrot sliders - with brie, truffle, honey, bacon-fig jam, roasted garlic, aioli and caramelized apples.

Project Access is the leading provider of vital on-site health, education, and employment services to families, children, and seniors living in affordable housing communities. More information about Project Access is available at [www.project-access.org](http://www.project-access.org).



*Brock and AJ Andrus with Chris and Lisa Young*



*Ronda and Rich Stayner with Dean and Stacey Allara*



*Dan and Anna Stanger*



*Bill Hirsch with Kristin Byrnes and Jonathan Webb*



*Wizard of Oz Characters; The Scarecrow, Dorothy, The Cowardly Lion and Tin Man*