

Chaffee's Got Heart Community Spotlight: Children's Discovery Ranch

The Chaffee's Got Heart Committee is extremely proud of local businesses and individuals that have gone above and beyond by doing extraordinary things during these uncertain times.

From innovating ways to thrive despite trying circumstances to showering struggling members of our community with generosity to prioritizing the health and safety of our most vulnerable, these businesses and individuals, who have been nominated for this honor by fellow community members, have shown what it really means when we say:

Chaffee's Got HEART.

Today, we sat down with **Kathi Wardlow, founder and director of Children's Discovery Ranch**, to find out how the pandemic changed operations at this early childhood center located on the historic Hutchinson Ranch.

How did COVID cause you to innovate?

We adapted operating procedures so they aligned with the guidelines to prioritize health and safety. The changes we made included creating consistent pods so groups weren't mixing, physically distancing while sending a message that we all are still connected, and adding in a ton more cleaning and sanitizing. We also reduced capacity by just running two of our three classrooms. We kept the same number of staff, however, so that we don't have to stress and can support each other if one of us has to stay home with our own kids who are sick or in quarantine. As a nature-based, play-based program we have acres of outside exploration space and are already typically outside a lot. We increased our emphasis on being in nature. The space to get out in the woods, rivers, fields was really helpful, supportive and healing for all of us. The best part is that the kids adapted so easily and quickly to all of the changes. Better than we did!

Why did you decide to go above & beyond to contribute to our community?

We recognize how important being part of our school family is for the health, well-being and development of kids, and how essential it is for our kids and families to have a space away from home where kids feel safe and nurtured. All the effort and stresses to reopen with a little risk as possible were worth it when we saw how happy the kids were and how appreciative the families were so they could get back to work themselves.



Where do you see examples of the idea that ‘Chaffee’s Got Heart’?

In addition to all the businesses and individuals who have shared their services, knowledge, and expertise for the greater good, I want to mention the collaboration between several local schools. We are fortunate to work with the Salida Early Childhood Center, Son Shine Inn and Poncha Springs Schoolhouse. Together, we've waded through the guidance, which has continually changed since the beginning of the pandemic. We've been able to reflect on our collective knowledge of best practices for young children and families, and to share ideas on what adaptations need to be made to minimize risks and keep our schools open and as safe and healthy as possible. In addition, the Salida School District, Chaffee County Public Health, Chaffee County Early Childhood Council and our local SBCC have provided invaluable resources and support to help get us through to the other side of these challenging times. So many people have stepped up for our community! Chaffee definitely has huge heart!

What’s your biggest takeaway from 2020?

We are all essential! Everyone brings their unique talents, knowledge and passion to the table to make our community vibrant. This creates a wonderful place for our children to grow and thrive.

Cool Tidbits:

Discovery Ranch has been serving our community since 2004.

Families associated with Discovery Ranch has always been supportive when the school has needed to grow and expand – either through monetary or in-kind donations. Kathi explains: “Our hard work and determination to keep it going through COVID is a way to give back to our community that has given us so much.”

It was important to the school to maintain a connection while they closed in April and May so they distributed activities to families and created story time videos that were posted to a private Facebook page.

To learn more, follow them on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/TwosEarlyLearning/>

Stories of Chaffee County individuals and businesses rising to the challenge abound.

We will be shining a light on those doing extraordinary things for the community throughout the upcoming months. Visit our websites ([Chaffee’s Got Heart](#) or [CCPH](#)) or follow us on [Facebook \(@COVID19ChaffeeCounty\)](#) to see more.

Know a potential candidate, or are you one yourself? Send nomination ideas to: health@chaffeecounty.org.