Women to Watch: Organization founder helps spread brother's love to others with disabilities

By Stacey Wiedower

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By day, she works in finance. But in her spare time, Jillian Sweet works to help others, and that's where her passion lies.

In 2009, Sweet founded On Our Own of Memphis, a nonprofit group that provides social opportunities for young adults with developmental disabilities to increase their independence and improve their quality of life.

From movie nights to ball games to dances, On Our Own gives its members — who tend to be left out of traditional social situations — a chance to hang out and have fun at events tailored for them.

Sweet's passion grew from watching her brother, Cleve, grow up with learning disabilities. While living with her family in Tampa, Fla., she began helping out with the original chapter of On Our Own, which was founded by a woman whose sister has Down Syndrome.

"I started going to events regularly with them and helping plan events," said Sweet, 29, who moved back to Memphis in 2007. "In January 2009, I had my first On Our Own event in Memphis. I still had a lot of contacts through my church and through a few people my brother grew up with. Once you get into it and you have one contact, they tell other parents, and they tell their dance teacher, etc. It was all word of mouth, and it grew rapidly."

Today, the group has roughly 40 members and 10 to 15 mentors who help with events. The mentors, generally in their 20s and 30s, are companions, not "baby sitters," Sweet said. She tries to link no more than two young adults to one mentor at each event.

"We welcome parents to come to the first event, but after that, we ask that they don't come," she added. "We're trying to teach young adults social independence without parents, which is not something that's normally taught."

Sweet, a newlywed, also works full-time for CFH Financial Services as an insurance and equity service coordinator. She loves her job — and she especially loves the fact that her boss supports her side job.
"My boss pushes us to all have a passion, something outside work we put our efforts toward," she said, adding that her employer was one of the founders of Make-A-Wish Foundation of the Mid-South. "I really like that. He's really supportive of On Our Own."

**How do you find time to work full-time and run an organization on the side?**

Sometimes it can be overwhelming, but I have some great friends and family that support OOO. Two of my closest friends, April Flanigan and Sarah Kingsley, help me run the group. They step in any time I need someone to plan an event or run an event. The mentors that volunteer their time with OOO are also a huge help in coming up with ideas and making sure events run smoothly.

**Tell me about the best moment you've experienced with On Our Own of Memphis.**

There are so many little moments and big moments that make OOO special for me — it's really hard to just pick one specific event. It seems like every event there is a moment that I say to myself, "THIS is what makes it all worth it." My favorite moment to talk about is our first event. Parents began dinner a little leery of whether or not their young adult would enjoy being off on their own. Halfway through dinner, they were approaching me saying they were leaving and would be back later after our movie. It didn't take long before their young adults decided social independence was going to be fun.

**What challenges did you face getting an organization off the ground?**

Money! That was definitely a barrier when trying to start the group. Luckily, I found a nonprofit legal group (Memphis Area Legal Services) that matched with me a lawyer (Sean Hord) who did all our work pro bono. It was a tremendous help to us; I had no clue where to even start the process. Another problem was building a website. Another God-send was Clayton Plymill, who offered to design the site for free.

**What's your goal for the future of On Our Own?**

My goal for OOO is to continue to touch lives. I would love for it to grow, but to be honest, I feel like if we touch one life, we've done our job. It is very important to me with all the recent media coverage of people using the "R-word" that we change the stereotype. I feel that all young adults should have the same opportunities in their social lives. Just because someone has a disability, it doesn't mean that they have to forgo having a fun and meaningful life.

**What one person would you say has made the biggest impact on your life, and why?**

This is something that I have been thinking about a lot lately. My parents have always been a huge impact in my life through all their support, but my brother, Cleve, has to be the biggest impact. I honestly wouldn't have the view on life that I do if it weren't for him. You could ask anyone that knows him, he is the most caring, selfless and hard-
working person you will ever meet. Though he has obstacles more than the average person, he still loves every person he meets and would do anything for them. The world be a better place if we had more Cleves walking around in it.

**Jillian Sweet**

**Age:** 29

**Family:** Husband Alan Sweet, brother Cleve Horton, parents Rick and Brenda Horton

**Job title:** Insurance and equity service coordinator at CFH Financial Services