

A Decade of Empowering the Caribbean Region and Its People

An Interview with Heidi Clarke,
Executive Director, The Sandals Foundation

EDITORS' NOTE Heidi Clarke's primary responsibilities include managing more than 100 Sandals Foundation programs annually, as well as developing and maintaining relationships with nonprofit and corporate partners, travel associates, government agencies, team members, donors and the local communities in the eight islands where it operates. Born and raised in Jamaica, Clarke has experience in education and social services, as well as business. She attended the University of Miami, where she studied child psychology and education while working with abused children and underprivileged students in the South Florida community. Upon returning to the Caribbean, she consulted on school boards and taught part-time while running a sail charter company with her husband in Trinidad and Tobago. In addition to her work with The Sandals Foundation, Clarke is involved in a wide range of community activities and provides counseling and mentoring for troubled teenage girls who have suffered from domestic violence.



Heidi Clarke

FOUNDATION BRIEF The Sandals Foundation (sandalsfoundation.org), is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and was created to continue to expand upon the philanthropic work that Sandals Resorts International has undertaken. It is the culmination of nearly four decades of dedication to playing a meaningful role in the lives of the communities where Sandals and Beaches Resorts operate across the Caribbean. The Sandals Foundation funds projects in three core areas: education, community and the environment. One hundred percent of the monies contributed by the general public to The Sandals Foundation go directly to programs benefiting the Caribbean community.

Will you discuss the mission and vision behind the development of The Sandals Foundation?

Sandals had been doing work in Caribbean communities 28 years before The Sandals Foundation was even born. The Foundation allowed us to formalize our efforts and to get our conscientious consumers, our team members, our global partners, and our travel agents all involved. We felt that, with their input, we could have much greater impact in our communities.

From day one, our mission has been about empowering our Caribbean people. It's about making the Caribbean a better place to live and to visit for our guests.

How critical has it been to engage the employees of Sandals in the activities and efforts of The Sandals Foundation?

We recognize our team members are one of our greatest assets. They're the reason we have one of the highest returning guest rates in the region.

They're also our eyes and ears into our communities, and they help us to recognize where there are gaps in the community that need filling. They volunteer their time and expertise in certain areas as well as share awareness with our

visitors and hotel guests who make up our largest source of donations.

Our employees have been very engaged from day one. They understand the importance of using our brand as a catalyst for change and, ultimately, to make a difference in their local communities and we have full buy in.

Will you discuss The Sandals Foundation's work in the education arena?

Education is the driving force around everything we do, because education empowers people and provides them with opportunities.

We work with ministries of education and on the national agenda to make sure we're all driving in the same direction.

We focus on capacity building for local institutions by working with schools to ensure that they have the necessary tools and technology.

It's important to provide solid environments on a holistic level, so we're looking at all aspects, from children's diets to teacher training and the actual infrastructure.

From a company level, graduates from our programs often have the opportunity to work alongside Sandals' employees as interns.

Additionally, we also have Sandals Corporate University, which addresses how we can take someone coming in at the ground level and let them have access to learning much more. We have many young people going through Sandals Corporate University now and climbing the ladder in management.

Will you discuss the importance of the environment to Sandals and some of the work of the Foundation around sustainability?

We always say, we don't sell a hotel – we sell a destination. That destination is made up of the people and the beautiful environment the Caribbean has to offer. If we don't invest in preserving and improving this at all levels through operations and

through the community, then we aren't protecting our investment in the country and throughout the Caribbean as a whole.

The Foundation has two focuses in this area: marine protection and environmental education in communities and schools.

Jamaica alone has over 250,000 lives that depend on our fishing industry, yet we're struggling when it comes to fish populations and with the decline of our reefs.

Addressing this requires that we have protected areas and that we work alongside ministries of agriculture and fisheries to develop ways to protect these livelihoods that are so dependent on the coastal regions.

This needs to be done hand in hand with environmental education. If we don't make this link, especially in a region like this where there are so many other social ills, then protection won't increase and people won't understand how our lives intertwine and depend on the environment.

Each Sandals and Beaches also has an Environmental Health Safety Officer who works closely with resort operations and in the community.

What type of partnerships has The Sandals Foundation formed to support its efforts?

We have witnessed firsthand how partnerships have allowed us to strengthen and expand our work within the region through like-minded companies who share the same vision. Over the past 10 years, we've worked (and still work) with a number of incredible partners including: Sesame Workshop, Scholastic Book Fairs, Coca-Cola, and Great Shape! Inc. to name just a few.

Our partnerships range from the corporate level to partnerships with grassroots organizations who understand community needs and help us to develop and deliver our programs.

We also lean on the strength of our resorts and the valued guests who visit with us each year to benefit the communities. Our guests have been incredible partners as has the whole travel industry.

How critical has the commitment from Butch Stewart and the management team of Sandals been to the Foundation's success?

It's crucial. If that commitment doesn't come from the top, then it isn't felt throughout the company. From day one, CSR and empowering people have been part of Mr. Stewart's vision and he, his son, Adam, who serves as Board President, and his entire team have been spreading this effort for four decades leading by example and playing an active role in lifting the region to greater heights. ●