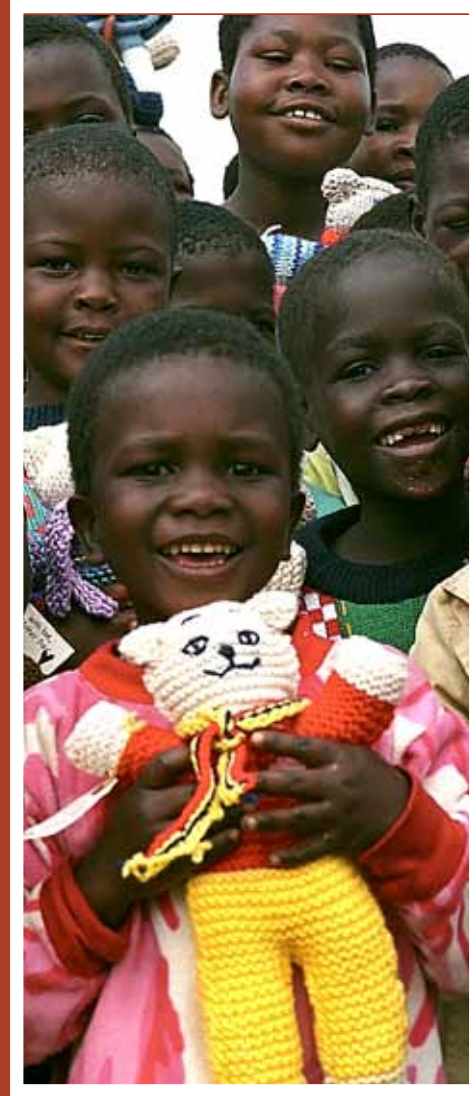


NEED | ISSUE 5 2008



ONE | MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Passion and everyday skills make an impact in the lives of children.



We read about poverty, famine and disease in the newspapers. Images of war and disaster flicker across our television screens. We want to help but are not always sure whether donations of time or money will make a difference. Yet persistent individual efforts can create big changes, as demonstrated by the following three people — one cake, one fan and one teddy bear at a time.

ONE | MAKING A DIFFERENCE

WRITER: KAYSIE PAUL

“It makes me feel so good to be able to do something to alleviate this feeling of ‘what can I do?’ Well, I can do this, and it is making a difference.”

MYRA SMITH

Flour, sugar, eggs and butter are staples in nearly every American kitchen. These simple ingredients form a sweet tradition. Baked to celebrate and topped with glowing candles, a birthday cake makes a child feel special. But for children who are living in shelters, birthdays can be sad affairs. Myra Smith is on a mission to sweeten every homeless child's birthday with a cake.

Watching her son blow out the candle on his first birthday cake gave Smith the idea. "I was just overcome with this feeling that there are children who don't have this," she says.

Six months after her son's birthday, Smith started the Birthday Cakes for Homeless Children program. She took a cake-baking class and purchased bakeware and ingredients. That first year, Smith says, she baked about four cakes a month and cried while baking each one.

Baking and delivering birthday cakes to a shelter near her home in Texas kept Smith busy. To expand, she looked for a partner to launch the program nationwide. Coincidentally her employer, CB Richard Ellis, was searching for a philanthropic program to support. After hearing about Smith's work, a group of the firm's top professionals invited her to discuss the program. CB Richard Ellis partnered with the program immediately,

and since 2002 Birthday Cakes for Homeless Children has delivered cakes in 46 cities.

Although Smith does not normally meet the children that she bakes for, her reputation as the "cake lady" has grown. While delivering a cake to a battered women's shelter, Smith was recognized by one of the employees whose son had received a cake a few years earlier. The woman told Smith that she and her son had once been residents of the shelter and had arrived the night before his birthday. Smith's cake gave the woman hope that her situation would improve.

Since her first delivery 10 years ago, volunteers for the program have baked and delivered more than 4,000 cakes. She is proud of her accomplishments; however, Smith says her job is far from finished because too many children still go without cakes on their birthdays.

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A CAKE MAKES THIS CHILD'S BIRTHDAY A JOYOUS OCCASION IN A WASHINGTON, D.C., SHELTER. PHOTOS | PAUL CORBIT BROWN

KAMILAH BRYANT

Sometimes the best person to help a child is another child. After watching news reports in 2005 requesting that people send donations to help those affected by Hurricane Katrina, kindergartner Kamilah Bryant, who lives with her family in Maryland, decided to help the children who lost their homes.

Armed with loose-leaf paper, a desire to help and a bright imagination, Kamilah made 800 paper fans. Her great-grandmother helped her sell the fans at their church. “I sold them for a dollar, but people gave me \$5’s, \$10’s and \$20’s,” Kamilah says. In total she raised more than \$1,000 USD.

Kamilah donated the money she earned to KaBOOM!, a nonprofit organization working to ensure that every child in America lives within walking distance of a place to play. KaBOOM!’s Operation Playground recently built 100 playgrounds in areas affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Kamilah’s money funded a slide for one New Orleans playground.

Kamilah advises other children who want to help, “Do your best.”

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VOLUNTEERS HELP TO BUILD A KABOOM! PLAYGROUND IN NEW ORLEANS, LA.
PHOTOS | COURTESY OF KABOOM!

AMY BERMAN

What can offer a comforting presence to a child affected by HIV/AIDS? When an article about women and children infected with the virus posed this question, Amy Berman remembered the comforting teddy bears her mother used to knit for her as a child. She asked her mother to teach her the teddy bear pattern and invited friends and family to join her in knitting bears at her home. “With every stitch I make, I know that bear is going to be held by a child,” Berman says. “It makes me feel so good to be able to do something to alleviate this feeling of ‘what can I do?’ Well, I can do this, and it is making a difference.”

Interest in her project rose when a local paper ran a story about her efforts. In response, Berman created a Web site where volunteer knitters can request the teddy bear pattern. Now she ships roughly 1,000 teddy bears each month to numerous African countries. Her small volunteer operation has become a nonprofit organization aptly titled Mother Bear Project. Volunteers have established knitting clubs across the US and in several European countries.

The bears are as individual as the caring knitters who make them. Some are clothed in simple shirts and pants, while others are adorned with detailed accessories such as scarves, hats and jackets. Their

individuality makes them special, Berman says, because each child receives a bear that is just for him or her. Every bear does share one feature with the others: a tiny red heart sewn onto its chest to “show that they were made with love,” explains Berman.

Berman has received hundreds of calls and letters saying how much the bears mean to the children. One young boy in South Africa rushed into his home to save his teddy bear just before the house was washed away by a flood. Another story was told by one of Berman’s distributors about a 7-year-old girl in Zambia who had AIDS. Her classmates refused to play with her, and soon she became too sick to attend school at all. Before she died, she asked to be buried with her teddy bear because, she said, it was her only friend. Her family honored her wish.

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HAND-KNIT TEDDY BEARS ARE CHERISHED BY RECIPIENTS. PHOTOS | COURTESY OF NELDA VILLINES

From one person with means to another in need, a birthday cake, a teddy bear or a paper fan can be a simple act of kindness that sends an extraordinary message of caring. N-ED

THE HUMANITARIAN MAGAZINE

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