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Local Residents Give Gifts that Keep Giving

By Jennifer Wake

When Lafayette resident Ginger Birdsall learned that her long-time friend, Diana Kercheval Bennett, passed away last month, she wasn't surprised that Bennett's will requested friends to support a special cause. What surprised friends who combined efforts to honor Bennett's life was that their memorial gift would be a water buffalo and a goat.

For years, Diana and her husband, Michael, had donated to Heifer International, a non-profit organization whose goal is to help end world hunger and poverty through self-reliance and sustainability. Donations purchase fast-multiplying livestock (like goats and rabbits), seeds, or provide training to families struggling with hunger and poverty.

"She loved the thought of the program and the empowerment of women in the third world," her daughter Charity Maness said. "Every year for at least the last 10 or so years I have received a gift donated to Heifer for Christmas from my mom."

"This organization helps people in need," added Birdsall. "There's so much starvation in these developing countries. The villagers can get milk from both the goat and the water buffalo, and the goat also has kids that go to other people in the village. Villagers can also sell them, or rent out the water buffalo to other villagers to work for them."

Birdsall helped to organize the gift of the two animals, which were purchased by a group of 16 of Bennett's close friends who had known her through the Lafayette Orinda Presbyterian Church singles ministry.

"I've never been involved in this kind of memorial gift, and I think it's a wonderful idea just as is giving gifts to help with the cure for cancer, heart disease and many other health issues," said Lafayette resident Marilyn Teakle. "This one is to help starving people - just as important."

Another of Bennett's friends, Anne Spanier added that the organization is unique because not only does it make a real difference in a person's life, but when the animal is then bred with another those offspring go to other families. "It has a multiplier effect."

According to Heifer International's Web site, everyone who receives a gift, be it a cow or seeds or training, agrees to pass it on to someone else in need, magnifying the benefit of the original gift.

Much like Heifer International, there are many organizations that take small contributions (by Western standards) and produce a big benefit in poverty-stricken areas.

In 2006, Muhammad Yunus of Grameen Bank was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for developing micro-credit, targeted to the poorest of the poor in Bangladesh. Small loans with little restrictions were given to these people who were "outside the banking orbit" and unable to get loans. One woman bought a goat with her first \$20 loan, and went on to become a successful entrepreneur and elected board member of the bank.

Another example is One Laptop Per Child, which was created to bring computers and the Internet to children in remote areas, using free Linux software and a windup design requiring no electrical power. For each \$100 laptop purchased, one would be sent to a child in a developing country.

Other organizations with more local aims request gifts that cost nothing at all.

Long-time Orinda resident Robin Cartier has seen more children in recent years come to her salon near Rossmoor (Salon Cartier) to donate their hair to Locks of Love, an organization started by a mother whose 4-year-old daughter had lost her hair due to alopecia areata (a disease that affects the hair follicles).

Other local children are foregoing their own birthday gifts to help causes close to their hearts. On June 28, 9-year-old Orinda resident, Tiffany Shinn, hosted a Make-A-Wish Foundation birthday party asking for donations in lieu of gifts after learning about the organization during a modeling job.

"I don't really need more gifts," Shinn wrote in a letter to party goers, adding, ". . . I was sad by the fact that, while I enjoy a normal and sometimes privileged life . . . there are kids my age who are dying."

Birdsall notes that a lot of kids in Lamorinda are very fortunate. "[Giving to a cause] is a nice way to pay back," she said.

As for the memorial gift, Birdsall and her friends are glad for a chance to continue Diana's participation in Heifer International. "That's what she did at every opportunity," Birdsall said of Bennett. "She was a magnet that way, getting people to march in the same direction."

For more information about Heifer International, Grameen Bank, One Laptop Per Child, Locks of Love, or Make-A-Wish Foundation, visit their Web sites at: heifer.com, grameen-info.org, laptop.org, locksoflove.org, or wish.org.

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