

## The Awareness of Giving

By Kim Stuart

When I was a young man, I lived in the Mission District of San Francisco. The reason, I needed a place to live and... a job.

So why not buy a dilapidated Victorian rooming house built in 1885, move in, and remodel the place? Problem solved: a roof over my head and job security for as long as my money lasted.

My folks lived in the middle-class Marina District, their home a 1930s stucco bungalow on Beach Street, across from the Marina Greens. Very safe, sunny, and predictable—a place I felt my parents deserved and appreciated. We were a close family, and I visited them every week or so.

### My Mother: A Renaissance Woman

Mom was a Renaissance woman. She wrote short stories and poetry, sculpted in clay, created intricate collages, sketched with a pencil, painted in oils, studied Italian, and earlier in her life was a talented and successful interior designer. As you might imagine, she was thoroughly interested in others—kind, generous, and almost to a fault.

On one of my visits, after letting myself in the front door, I stooped to pick up the mail from the floor below the mail slot. Casually glancing through the bills—typical junk mail and advertisements—I noticed two postcards. One was from Guard Dogs for the Blind, and the other from St. Joseph's Indian School for Children.

As usual, Mom was in her “She Shed,” located on the ground floor at the back of the house. It had two large sliding glass doors that gave a view of a well-tended lawn surrounded by flowerbeds, low, evenly trimmed hedges, and an Italian plum tree. All enclosed by a six-foot-high well-weathered 1x12 Redwood fence.

**“My Mom’s words, delivered with her graceful, gentle voice, were an eye-opener to me”**

“Hi Maja,” I greeted her after a hug and a kiss. Without waiting for her answer, I continued, “Tell me about your involvement with Guide Dogs and the St. Joseph Indian School.” “Kimmer, I’ve been supporting them for years. They’re both very different but worthy. I feel strongly that if we can help others, even in a small way, and we don’t, shame on us.” Mom’s words, delivered with her graceful, gentle voice, were an eye-opener to me. The last few words of her heartfelt message would change my life.

### Starting a Giving Fund

We decided to pool our resources and start a giving fund. The details were yet to be determined, but our motivation was the same: help those who were worthy and dedicated.

Within a few weeks, I found our first recipient. She was a medical assistant in the office of a dermatologist I was seeing. She fit our requirements to a “T”: well-spoken, confident,

polite, and motivated. Her goal was to become a registered nurse.

Between making the deal with Maja and encountering our first recipient, I had done some research. A friend and neighbor, a Quaker, had worked for a community foundation managing donor funds. His advice was simple: “Focus on one or two areas only. If you spread your money too far, the benefits will be minimal.”

I decided Maja and I would focus on health and education, with a target on people of color—a broad area, but a good start for us.

After pitching our newest potential recipient to Maja, she asked a few questions, nodded in agreement, and we decided to cover her first semester of nursing school.

Naturally curious, we followed up on our nurse-to-be, and as expected, she graduated as an RN. We continued to find and help young, worthy, motivated women of color with funds for their education. We had only one failure—a bad judgment call on our part.

A decade or so later, I went off on my own, providing money to build a primitive library in Tibet and a floating school in Halong Bay, Vietnam.

About eight years ago, Debie and I met Lorna B. at a mutual friend's birthday party. She had just started mentoring and sponsoring young novice monks and had a desire to sponsor more.

Lorna shared how these monks came from remote villages, where their families earned under \$2,000 a year. They were lucky and grateful to attend school in Luang Prabang.

After careful deliberation, Lorna chose a novice monk named Chanh as her first recipient. I offered to sponsor his friend Siphone. The two of them moved to the capital Vientiane for college, where Siphone eventually graduated with a computer engineering degree and became an IT professional for SITA, a world-class telecommunications company.

**“If you are able to help and don’t, shame on you.”**

Over the years, we’ve helped renovate a Buddhist primary school, sponsored orphanage children for college, and provided books, clothing, and food for a deaf center and orphanage programs. Giving has empowered and changed their lives, and brought me immense joy.

I often remember the words of my mother: “If you are able to help and don’t, shame on you.”

### **The Ongoing Journey of Giving**

As Sisamone, a former monk now about to graduate with a mechanical engineering degree, said in a presentation to aspiring youth:

- Think and believe that you can do it. You can do it as long as you think you can.
- It will never be too late to begin the journey.
- Help others.

**“For our efforts, the world has become a slightly better place”**

Lorna and I are continuing our support for Nack, our newest student, and we are confident he will follow the successful pattern of Sisamone, Siphone, and Chanh. Working with Lorna has shown me the power of grassroots efforts, where two people decide to make a difference. We've continued making grants through the Marin Community Foundation, increasing the amount of money available each year. If there's a lesson here, it's that we chose this path voluntarily, and for our efforts, the world has become a slightly better place.