

# Virtue In Action

'Tis the Season for Giving

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION

FOR THE PAST 26 YEARS, LARRY STEWART HAS BEEN KNOWN ONLY AS SECRET SANTA AS HE HANDED OUT \$100 DOLLAR BILLS TO STRANGERS IN NEED DURING THE HOLIDAYS.



Felicia Young, of Louisville, Ky., shows off the \$100 bill she received from Larry Stewart, Wednesday, Nov. 29, 2006, in Burr Ridge, Ill. (AP Photo/M. Spencer Green)

## ‘Tis the Season for Giving

Many of us associate the holiday season with giving. The giving of gifts is one way we express our care for our family and friends. And while all of us can relate to the wonderful feeling we get when we give gifts to people we know, a “Secret Santa” from Missouri has shown us a deeper level of generosity in giving gifts to thousands of complete strangers. The identity of this Santa remained a secret until this year. The revelation of his identity and his amazing story are now inspiring countless others to follow his example.



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In December of 1979, life was not going well for Larry Stewart. For the second year in a row, he lost his job only one week before Christmas. So with very little money and an understandable lack of holiday cheer, Stewart headed to a drive-in restaurant to **contemplate** what he should do next. When his waitress brought the food to his car, he noticed “it was cold, and this car hop didn’t have on a very big jacket, and I thought to myself, ‘I think I got it bad. She’s out there in this cold making nickels and dimes.’”

Incredibly, instead of focusing on himself and his own suffering, Stewart was thinking of others, putting

himself in another person’s situation, which is the essence of **empathy**. Stewart decided to give the waitress a \$20 bill, telling her to keep the change. Stewart recounted how “Suddenly I saw her lips begin to tremble and tears begin to flow down her cheeks. She said, ‘Sir, you have no idea what this means to me.’ “And man, I’m telling you what, it just ripped my heart right out,” he said. And I thought, ‘Wow.’ I had never had a feeling like that.”

Stewart then became even more motivated to help others. He went to the bank and took out \$200 in mostly \$5 and \$10 bills. He then took the money and began looking for

people to help, hoping to **alleviate** their suffering during the holiday season.

### The True Measure of Generosity

What's so surprising about Stewart's actions that day is that the \$200 he gave away was most of what he had, and he did it at a time when he didn't even have a job. Stewart's actions remind us that the true measure of generosity isn't the amount of money, time or talent



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that we give, but rather the sacrifice our giving requires. Stewart gave not from his surplus, but rather from his need. It's interesting to ask what could have motivated Stewart to give so much. Likely his sense of **compassion** in experiencing sympathy for others in need, and in desiring to help were greater than the fear and uncertainty from losing his job.

After that December of 1979, Larry Stewart's luck turned around. He went on to make millions in the cable television and long-distance phone service industries. And with his increase in income, he has also increased his giving. For more than 25 years, Stewart has been finding people in the streets, stores, and even parking lots, handing them \$100 bills. So far he has given about \$1.3 million!

### Selflessness

Although the amount of Larry Stewart's giving is remarkable, his story is also noteworthy because his giving had always been done anonymously. As his reputation spread over the years, he allowed the news media to follow him around, mostly because he wanted to hear about what happened to the people who received his money. He made the reporters agree not to reveal his identity and until recently, the people of the Kansas City area only knew him as the "Secret Santa." Stewart's desire to help others wasn't rooted in the fame or reward it would bring him, but instead, it was a wonderful expression of **selflessness**. Whether it was helping others instead of thinking about his own financial difficulties or downplaying the media attention that his mission later brought, Stewart has always tried to keep the focus on the giving to others and rather than himself.

Larry Stewart's mission to help others has also been filled with a sense of **spontaneity**. He chose not to establish a foundation or organization to support his work. Instead, he relied on his instincts to seek out those in need and to help them as best he could. Perhaps the simplicity of his mission can be

**attributed** to his own experience with poverty.

Throughout the early '70's Stewart lived out of his yellow Datsun 510. He recalls one day when he approached a woman at a church asking for help. The woman told him that the person who could help him was gone for the day and that he would have to come back. "As I turned around, I knew I would never do that again," Stewart said.

The uniqueness of Stewart's efforts have allowed him to give something that people don't have to "beg for, get in line for, or apply for." Stewart believes the lack of a formal organization has allowed him to focus on what he likes to do best—helping others in need.

### Spreading his Message to Others

As Stewart's following grew, he began training special "elves" to help him in his efforts. While he enjoyed giving alone, he knew that by creating a **team** to share in his mission he could help many more people in need.

Some of these elves are well known such as NFL Hall of Famer Dick Butkus and Buck O'Neil, the late Negroes Leagues All Star and first African American coach in the Major Leagues. Since that time, his message has spread from Kansas City to New York and Chicago. Other members of the media also took notice. When Oprah wanted to have Stewart as a guest on her show, he appeared with a beard and hat to protect his identity.

Stewart only decided to reveal his identity after learning in April that he has cancer. His illness has caused him to lose his energy and appetite. Knowing that he may not be able to personally continue his mission, he decided to reveal his identity with the hope that thousands of others would be inspired to a greater level of generosity. He plans to speak to community groups about his mission of kindness and inspire others to give of their time, talents and money to others in need. Despite the financial hardships of his early years, and now physical hardships, Stewart has been able to **persevere** and find ways to keep giving. "That's what we're here for," he

says, "to help other people out."

Fortunately it's working. As an example, Jennifer Zindel of Overland Park, Kansas has started what she hopes will become a family tradition. At the beginning of the holiday season each year she will give each of her four children an envelope with money, along with a "Secret Santa" poem she wrote encouraging them to be thankful for what they have and to give the money away to someone in need.

Often, our lives are marked by important events that help to shape our identities and create in us a new awareness of the type of person we want to become. A cold evening in December of 1979 was one such event in Larry Stewart's life. Although his future seemed dim and he could not afford to give very much, he took a risk by helping another person who was down on her luck. The joy he received in this random act of kindness set the course for what would become his life's mission: giving to others without expecting anything in return. Stewart calls this giving "His Christmas present to himself." But his actions have also been a present to many others who have been inspired by his selfless acts of charity and now seek ways to incorporate these virtues into their own lives. This is exactly what the Secret Santa hoped for when he decided to tell his story.

### Vocabulary

**Alleviate**- to make easier to endure; lessen.

**Attribute**-to regard as resulting from a specified cause.

**Circumstance**-the existing conditions or state of affairs surrounding and affecting a person.

**Compassion**- Feeling of sympathy for the distress of others, with the desire to help

**Contemplate**-to consider thoroughly; think fully or deeply about.

**Empathy**-entering into the feelings or spirit of others and imagining yourself in another person's situation.

**Generosity**-freely giving of our time, talents and resources

**Perseverance**-trying hard and continuously, despite obstacles and difficulties.

**Selflessness**-having, exhibiting, or motivated by no concern for oneself; esp. with regard to fame, position, money, etc.

**Spontaneity**-the quality that comes or results from a natural impulse or tendency; without effort or premeditation; natural and unconstrained; unplanned.

**Teamwork**- cooperative or coordinated effort on the part of a group of persons acting together as a team or in the interests of a common cause.

**Trepidation**-a state of anxious fear; apprehension.

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### FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION

#### Virtues Highlighted

Compassion, Generosity, Empathy, Selflessness, Teamwork, Perseverance

#### Lesson Goals

- Provide students with a remarkable example of giving.
- Show students how small, random acts of kindness can have a profound impact on their school and community.
- Create a desire in students to give generously without expecting anything in return.
- Develop in students an understanding of the virtues of empathy, compassion, generosity, perseverance, teamwork, charity, and selflessness.
- Build awareness in students of how living out the virtue of generosity can inspire others to practice these virtues as well.

## Virtue In Action

*Connecting Virtues to Our World*

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#### Discussion Question Options

1. Most people have been captured by the uniqueness of Larry Stewart's story. What are some of the aspects that make his mission so special?
2. Let's try to imagine ourselves in Larry Stewart's position that night in Dec. 1979, having just lost our job, with little money and seeing someone else in need. What would we have done?
3. Having read the story of Larry Stewart do you think you are now more open in giving to others, even when it requires a real sacrifice?
4. In addition to giving money, what are some of the ways we can help others in need?

5. Have you ever witnessed an anonymous act of charity that was not intended to be seen or known? Explain.
6. Until recently, Larry Stewart chose to give anonymously. Was this a good idea? Would it have been better for him to reveal his identity earlier so that others could hear his story? Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.
7. What charitable organizations help others in need in our community and nationally? Are formal organizations a better, more effective way to help those in need than Larry Stewart's method of giving out money to people he thinks need help? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

8. If your students feel comfortable, invite them to share what their religious traditions say about giving to others. Why is giving an important part of civil society as well?
9. A number of other charitable endeavors have caught on with young people such as Lance Armstrong's "Live Strong" bracelets and Jimmy Carter's Habitat for Humanity. Do you think that Larry Stewart's story will continue to inspire others and grow as these efforts have? Why or why not?

#### Journal Writing Options

1. Victor Hugo is quoted as saying "As the purse is emptied the heart is filled." What does this quote mean to you? How does Larry Stewart embody what this quote means? How do you live it out in your own life?



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2. When was the last time you did something for someone else without asking anything in return? How did it make you feel?

### Extended Learning Projects

1. Read [The Giving Tree](#) by Shel Silverstein aloud to your class. (The story is written for elementary level students, but even high school students like to be read to!) After finishing the story, discuss its theme as it relates to gift giving. How do we define the word *gift*? In the story, the gift is not a material gift, but rather one from the heart. Brainstorm other “free” gifts that we can give to others.
2. There are many military families in severe financial need due to extended deployments, and injury. You can be a Secret Santa for these families by purchasing and donating items through a partnership between USA Cares and Sears through the web site below:  
<http://usacares.us/>
3. Invite students to bring in newspaper articles that discuss people performing random acts of kindness for others. Encourage them to find articles not only from the local community, but from other countries as well.
4. Have students review the various articles written about Larry Stewart and his mission. Discuss any new details that the students may have found about his life. Then have them play the role of a reporter and write a newspaper story about someone they know who has performed a random act of kindness. Encourage them to be creative. Ask them to interview the people involved in the story and include their reactions.

<http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=%22secret+santa%22+%22kansas+city%22+cash&btnG=Google+Search>

### Secret Santa Stories

<http://secretsantausa.com/>

Secret Santa USA

<http://www.thekansascitychannel.com/news/1854031/detail.html>

KMBC TV’s Video Coverage of Secret Santa

[http://www.reviewjournal.com/lvrj\\_home/2004/Dec-22-Wed-2004/business/25526649.html](http://www.reviewjournal.com/lvrj_home/2004/Dec-22-Wed-2004/business/25526649.html)

The Las Vegas Review-Journal’s Coverage of Secret Santa’s Visit

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2001/12/20/usat-acov-secret-santa.htm>

USA Today’s Coverage of Secret Santa’s Visit to New York City

5. Turn your classroom into a team of Secret Santas! Find ways that you can give to others in your school or community. You may even choose to give anonymously as Larry Stewart has done. Ask the class to report back their reactions to the class. How did people respond to their giving? How did giving to others make the students feel?
6. Secret Santa wants to hear your story. If you have had a personal experience either as a giver or recipient of an act of kindness please share that so we can share it with our readers. Selected stories may be included in a collection of Secret Santa Stories and published for our readers enjoyment. If you know of someone else in your community who is a Secret Santa and has a story to share we would like to know about that as well.  
As you read the accounts of Secret Santa’s annual “sleigh rides” let him know what your thoughts are. He makes every effort to answer all the mail. You can share by sending your message here: [santa@secretsantausa.com](mailto:santa@secretsantausa.com)