

December 2007

Virtue In Action

The Gift of Giving

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION



Give or Take

*What will our hands do this holiday season?
Some teens in America focus more on giving than receiving.*

A young girl is on a cell phone with a friend complaining bitterly about her parents' strictness in a popular television ad. Mid-rant, the teen peers outside the window into the wintry landscape and sees said parents arriving at home, their arms laden with stacks of holiday gifts bearing the name of a popular electronics retailer. Immediately, the teen squeals with excitement about the bright blue and yellow boxes, tells her friend she has changed her opinion about her now "awesome" parents, and quickly hangs up the cell phone, presumably for a closer look at her Christmas bounty.

The Gift of *Giving*

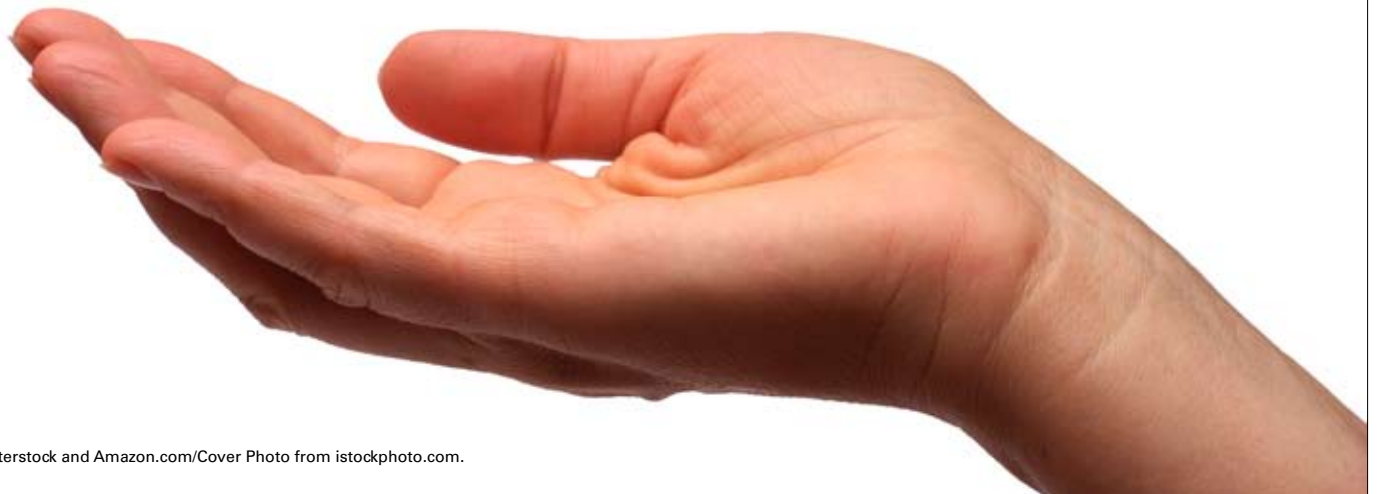
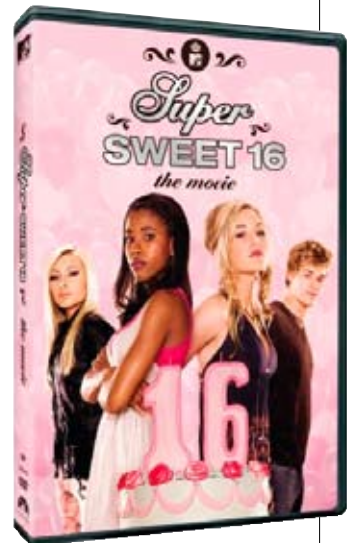
This scenario played out in the commercial is similar to many traditionally airing around the holiday season, and this year is no exception. The holidays, for many young people, are a time of receiving, as communicated in ads encouraging them to ask for everything from the latest fashions to the newest video game titles. In fact, the tone of the holiday season appears to be based on how much you were able to get and the message of materialism and excess is not limited to the holiday season.

One of the most popular MTV programs to date is "My Super Sweet 16," a nearly three-year-old reality show in which teens, some the sons and daughters of celebrities, plan elaborate **galas** often in excess of tens of thousands of dollars. These parties show teens hiring professional hair and makeup artists, changing outfits multiple times, and in some cases, paying to secure the attendance of celebrities, including top-selling singers Ciara and Rihanna. Many of the teens receive brand new luxury cars at the conclusion

of each episode, which MTV describes as "one character's outrageous journey as they plot, plan and prep for the party to end all parties."

But what type of message do these over-the-top "My Super Sweet 16" celebrations or the shop-until-you-drop **mantra** of the holidays send in a nation where many go hungry and homeless? What kind of reaction would pricey parties or holiday wish lists invoke globally, especially in conflict-torn regions of the world including the Sudan, Iraq and Afghanistan, where survival might be considered a gift?

Those questions have occurred to some young people



here in America, who are emerging as **heroes** in their communities and future leaders. These kids – some as young as 12 and others in their teens when they began their charitable efforts – have not only spent time worrying about the plights of those less fortunate, they have turned their **compassion** into action. From the story of a farm-town girl in Oregon who raises eggs to send money to Sudan to Texas teens who donated their Sweet 16 parties to breast-cancer patients, everyday young people subscribe to and demonstrate an important **adage** too often ignored in today’s culture: it’s better to give than to receive.

Teens Partying for a Purpose

Much like the teens of MTV’s Sweet 16 documentary, Texas teen Devyn McPherson thought of her milestone birthday party this past November as an occasion to have a great time with friends and get a car. That was until she and an 18-year-old friend, Hanna Joyner, came up with an idea to transform both their birthday parties into a way to raise money for breast-cancer patients, according to the Joplin Globe newspaper.

“We know people with breast cancer,” Joyner told Joplin Globe reporter Joe Hadsall. “When you see that happen, you want to do something about it.”

What the teens did was ask guest to make donations to local foundation, Hope 4 You Breast Cancer Foundation, instead of presents. The result: A \$3,000 check made out to the charity after donations from attendees and a spirit of fellowship that spread to guests, including Kelly Smalling, the sister of a breast cancer survivor. Smalling was amazed by the ability of both McPherson and Joyner to step outside the norms of Sweet 16 parties to show such **empathy** and support for strangers.

“To use such big events in their lives to help someone else is beyond belief,” Smalling said. “I wouldn’t have been that mature at their age.”

Also evidencing a maturity and generosity beyond their years are approximately 125 participants in “Give a Mitzvah – Do a Mitzvah,” a New York-based program that allows pre-teens to use their coming-of-age Jewish ceremony to help others, and, this year, expanded to allow older teens to start their own local and international social service projects.

Give a Mitzvah, which began three years ago and helped teens raise money instead of gifts for **bar and bat**

mitzvahs, has spawned an offshoot, “Explore a Mitzvah,” and many “Give a Mitzvah” participants are involved, according to an article called “After Bar Mitzvahs, Teens Keep Giving” written by Forward.com reporter Marissa Brostoff.

One such teen is Ben Bleiberg, 15, who raised money through “Give a Mitzvah” to give laptops to inpatients at the Mount Sinai Children’s Center Foundation in New York. Bleiberg **empathized** with sick students whom he had never met.

“Kids [who] are in there for months at a time often get held back in school,” Bleiberg, told Brostoff of Forward.com. “But if they have a laptop, they can keep up [with their class]. Literally, this can help them not be held back.” Bleiberg also has volunteered at Manhattan’s 92nd street Y, playing instruments with children who have learning disabilities, Brostoff reported, adding that Bleiberg said of his experiences:

“The experience was unlike anything I’ve ever done before,” Bleiberg told Forward.com. “It wasn’t just about giving away money. It was also an instructive program in how to be a **philanthropist**, how to give away money in a way you want it to be used.”



Hanna Joyner, 18, and Devyn McPherson (right), 16, present a ceremonial check for \$2,950 to Holly Adams (left), president of the Hope 4 You Breast Cancer Foundation. Joe Hadsall photo

And that giving goes beyond religious traditions. One “Give a Mitzvah” participant has since gone on to volunteer for a not-for-profit not affiliated with the Jewish association. Alex Klein, who lives in Seattle, is working to help expand and develop health systems in developing countries and spends his summers working at the organization.

“When you come from a privileged background, you have a responsibility to be part of your community,” Klein said.

Time is Money

What of children and teens who come from humble backgrounds and might not have parents who can help back their fundraising efforts? Spending your time to assist others can be just as, or even more important, than spending money.

Take for example, a 13-year-old girl who has been recognized by both the National Public Radio and the New York Times for her tireless efforts to help Sudan. Tacey Smith, of the farm town of Gaston, Oregon, was so moved by watching “Hotel Rwanda,” that she spent the last two years raising money to help Sudan, an African country whose Darfur region is being torn apart by **genocide** and unspeakable violence against women and children.

“I had a feeling it would kindle her sense of social justice, or something that she should really respond to that,” Jill Smith told NPR last September.

Smith worked within her means, selling eggs raised on her family’s small farm, plus organizing a Sudan fair. Thus far, she has raised over \$2,000 through her efforts and has committed herself to not being like the Americans mentioned in the movie.

In one scene, a cameraman character describes how Americans would react to horrible footage he captured of Darfur:

“If people see this footage,” the cameraman says in the movie, “They’ll say, ‘Oh my God,’ that’s horrible,’ and go on eating their dinners.” Smith hopes her actions, and that of other young people who have joined her, will end that type of apathy:

“Maybe sometime in the future, we’ll look back on ourselves and think we were such fools not to help with this,” Tacey told NPR. “And I hope that some time, we do.”

Give What You’ve Got

The examples of young people who **empathize** with the less fortunate and give of themselves, luckily, do not end.

In December, high school teens – from four rival schools in Tyler, Texas – devoted three days to helping local service agencies. Their kindness and compassion will not end with the holidays. The next phase of the “Four As One” program is, in January, to launch a Web site in January where agencies list even more volunteer opportunities for high schoolers.

The stories of teens working to help others demonstrates the potential each of us has to improve our world. Whether it’s helping with local charities, or reaching out to others in remote places like Sudan, we have the ability to **empathize** with and touch the lives of others in meaningful and powerful ways. During this holiday season we can each take the time to consider the needs of others and how we can give the best gift of all – the gift of ourselves - our time, talents and resources.

Vocabulary

Laden: loaded down
Galas: festive occasion, especially a lavish social event or entertainment

Mantra: A commonly repeated word or phrase
Heroes: a person who is regarded as a model due to their acts of courage, or nobility of purpose and noble qualities

Compassion: feelings of sympathy for the distress of others, with the desire to help

Adage: A saying that sets forth a general truth and that has gained credit through long use.

Empathy: entering into the feeling or spirit of others and imagining yourself in another person’s situation

Bar mitzvah: solemn ceremony held in the synagogue, usually on

Saturday morning, to admit as an adult member of the Jewish community a Jewish boy 13 years old who has successfully completed a prescribed course of study in Judaism.

Bat mitzvah: a solemn ceremony, chiefly among Reform and Conservative Jews, that is held in the synagogue on Friday night or Saturday morning to admit formally as an adult member of the Jewish community a girl 12 to 13 years old.

Philanthropist: person with the effort or inclination to increase the well-being of humankind, as by charitable aid or donations.

Genocide: the deliberate and systematic extermination of a national, racial, political, or cultural group

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Lesson Goals:

- Develop understanding of the virtues of compassion, empathy, generosity and caring
- Help students see how giving is important, year-round, and should not be limited to the holiday season, but incorporated into everyday life
- Inspire students to live out the virtues of compassion and generosity by showing them real-life examples of kids and teens using their resources – whether big or small—to assist others and encourage others in their peer group to do the same on a consistent basis
- To build awareness that young people can and are making significant contributions in addressing the needs of others



istockphoto.com

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Virtue In Action

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Discussion Question Options:

1. Do you think today's youth is more focused on giving or receiving? Provide examples to support your opinion. Is teen culture – and young adult culture—concerned enough about the plight of those less fortunate than themselves? If not, what can be done to change that attitude?
2. How did Texas teen Devyn McPherson throw a different type of “Sweet 16” party? Whom did her party benefit?
3. Explain the concept behind “Give a Mitzvah.” Do you feel you could donate presents from one of your parties or celebrations to others? Why or why not?
4. Explain how Tacey Smith, of a small farm town in Oregon, is making a difference in Sudan. What inspired her? Have you ever been inspired to action by a movie or event, and if so, what were you motivated to do?
5. What was remarkable about the “Four As One” program begun in Tyler, Texas? How is the group going to continue to make a difference?

Journal Writing Options:

1. Choose a charitable cause or group you admire. Explain what you would be willing to do – from donating gifts to spending time—to assist with that cause.
2. Make a list of four things you'd like for holiday gifts; then research how much those items cost. If you were a philanthropist, how could you donate that money so that it would serve a good cause? Explain whether or not that contribution could make a real impact.
3. Ask the students to select one of the teenagers or teenage groups highlighted in the lesson, and using what they learned, write a speech thanking them for their contributions, at the same time explaining what the honoree(s) did and how they've helped the world through their actions.

Extended Learning Activities:

1. Break students into small groups or four of five and give them 10 minutes to brainstorm a charity. Then, ask them to come up with a particular cause, a mission, at least two reasonable means of fundraising, and a statement of the impact they would like to have on society. Note: Students can get ideas for causes from dosomething.org, which lists causes that young people are involved in nationally and globally.
2. Have students get into groups and choose one charitable organization they admire, then present a short report on how that organization was founded, how it operates currently, and how it has changed the world for the better. This may give them a sense of how an organization can start out small, but grow into a powerful entity.

Internet Resources:

Forward.com: "After Bar Mitzvahs, Teens Keep Giving": <http://www.forward.com/articles/11959/>

NPR.com: "Seventh Grader Works to Help Darfur Refugees" <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5755298>

The New York Times, "Heroes of Darfur"
<http://www.sudanreeves.org/Sections-article556-p1.html>

Tyler Paper, "Teens Hold Service Project to Help Area Agencies"
<http://www.sudanreeves.org/Sections-article556-p1.html>

The Joplin Globe, "Teens Present Almost \$3,000 to Breast Cancer Foundation"

http://www.joplinglobe.com/joplin_metro/local_story_332162142.html

"My Super Sweet 16" Show Guide

http://www.mtv.com/ontv/dyn/sweet_16/series.jhtml

Charitable Ideas Web Site: www.dosomething.org