



The Goodness of America

Anonymous Giver Revealed

Having once received a truly anonymous gift myself — cash in an unmarked envelope — I know the feeling that comes when you're on the receiving end of an unexpected gift. I was grateful, yes, but also curious.

Well, recently a group of about 400 people came together in Canton, Ohio, to remember one such giver, a man who wished his identity to remain a secret so that others could be blessed without any strings attached.

On December 17, 1933, an advertisement appeared in the *Canton Repository* newspaper. Under the pseudonym B. Virdot, the ad offered cash gifts to needy families in exchange for letters detailing their financial troubles and how they would choose to spend the money if they were to receive it.

Although B. Virdot promised to keep the respondents' identities a secret, many found it difficult to ask for help. "If I thought this would be printed in the papers I would rather die of hunger first," wrote one proud woman. Indeed, it was a time in America when accepting charity was commonly seen as an admission of one's own failure.

One hundred fifty people living in Canton during the Great Depression were recipients of cash gifts from B. Virdot. Most checks were for as little as \$5 (equivalent to about \$84 today). Although the money was often spent on necessities like food and clothing, it was sometimes used to purchase something special. For instance, Olive Hillman used her \$5 check to buy her then-eight-year-old daughter, Geraldine, a porcelain doll. "I was thrilled to get it," said Geraldine Hillman Fry, now 85. "It really was the only doll that I ever had in my life, so it meant a lot to me."

B. Virdot's true name remained a mystery until 2008 when Ted Gup, grandson of Samuel J. Stone, received a suitcase containing his grandfather's papers. Inside the suitcase were letters addressed to a B. Virdot. After some investigation, Ted discovered that the name B. Virdot was actually a combination of his grandfather's daughters' names: Barbara, Dorothy, and Virginia.

It was to this name, this man, that Helen Palm wrote in 1933, "I am writing this because I need clothing, and sometimes we run out of food." The *New York Times* reported on November 8, 2010 that a reunion was recently held for the families of the recipients whose lives B. Virdot had once touched. Palm, the only recipient still alive, attended. "I thought about B. Virdot a lot" over the years, said Palm. "I was really surprised when I learned his real name."

Teens Try to Return Money

More often than not, young adults are only in the news for not-so-praiseworthy incidents. So, when we do get a glimpse of teen integrity, maturity, and the like, it is indeed refreshing — and perhaps contagious.

The November 5 *Boston Herald* reported that two students from Snowden International School in Boston, Trinh Tat and Carlotta Feliciano, both 17, saw a man drop more than \$1,000 worth of MoneyGram money orders near the Prudential Center in Boston.

Unable to track him down, they began to seek advice on how to get the money orders returned to their



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rightful owner. They called the police, contacted a bank and a supermarket where they believed the money orders could have been issued, and called MoneyGram directly. Referring to Tat, a spokesperson for MoneyGram said, "I'm glad that she's such a great citizen to find these and try to give them back to the owner."

"It could be his hard-earned money. He could have just been trying to pay his rent. I just hope to give the money back to him," Trinh Tat told the *Herald*.

Unfortunately, initial attempts to locate the owner of the money orders proved to be unsuccessful, even frustrating. "I went to the bank for advice and they told me since I found it I could keep it," Tat said. Perhaps the bank's advice would be tempting to some, but Tat doesn't intend to do that.

With help from school officials and friends, the search will continue until the man who lost the money orders is found. Meanwhile, in celebration of her honesty and willingness to do the right thing, Tat was honored as her school's "Citizen of the Month" last November.

Little Dresses Bring Big Smiles

Little Dresses for Africa is a Christian, non-profit organization dedicated to improving girls' self-worth through the gift of a dress. The idea was born in 2007 while Rachel O'Neill was on a mission trip in Malawi, Africa. There, she saw precious young girls wearing tattered clothes that were literally falling apart. The concept was simple: outfit less fortunate girls with new dresses and in the process build their sense of self-worth. And what could be simpler than making dresses out of store-bought, ready-made pillowcases?

"I started it because pillowcases make the dresses so easy to make," O'Neill told the *Kalamazoo Gazette* in 2009. "The hem is already there, and it's so much cheaper and quicker than starting from scratch. It just spread like wildfire. We now have groups sewing all over the country."

In 2008, one such group from Michigan began constructing 100 dresses from donated pillowcases. Once her women's club project was finished, Eleanor Bielenda set a goal to make an additional 1,000 dresses all by herself. Happily, the October 24, 2010 issue of the *St. Valentine Heartline* reported, Eleanor exceeded her original goal, forwarding 1,300 dresses to O'Neill for distribution in Africa.

Making the dresses appears addicting. Brownie troops, home-economics classes, Bible study groups, and experienced seamstresses across America continue to whip them up in masses. To date, over 100,000 dresses have been sewn and distributed through orphanages in Africa and other Third World countries.

The overwhelming success of the program reflects the hearts and hands of many willing to sew, donate fabric and supplies, and assist with shipping costs. In an October 11, 2010 posting on her Little Dresses for Africa website O'Neill said, "I can't begin to describe the beauty and the love stitched in every little dress that arrives each day from all over the U.S. and Canada.... We're not just sending dresses, we're sending hope!"



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