

THE GREATEST GIFT

by Ken Bradbury



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She was ten years old when they came to her and said, “Julie, your mother has cancer.” Julie was without doubt the most popular fifth-grader in our school: bright, talented, a sunbeam smile and two blue eyes created to melt even the hardest heart. She was a cheerleader, one of the best young athletes our school had ever known, and was without doubt the most caring young girl I’ve ever known.

Then came the day at the beginning of the school year when her father and aunt approached her after supper and told her about her mother’s cancer. They told her about how her mother would be confined to their home and would need constant, round-the-clock care. Julie’s aunt could stay with her during the day and her father in the evenings, but there was a two hour time period after school when the family would have to hire someone to take care of her mother. Julie’s response was immediate. “I’ll take care of Mommy,” she said.

Her father protested. This would mean Julie’s dropping out of all school activities to hurry home. Julie had become a talented singer and dancer in the last two years and she had been chosen to do a great deal of performing. “I’ll take care of Mommy,” she said, and that was the end of that.

Within two years Julie’s mother died. Two year’s later her father was walking to his car after work and suffered a fatal heart attack.

And I can still remember hearing her scream when in her sophomore year during volleyball practice, her aunt walked in to the school to inform Julie that her only brother had been killed in a car accident.

Our entire community was devastated, not only at the loss of those we loved, but what such back-to-back tragedies would do to Julie Little could we have guessed what would occur at the funeral home. I attended each of the visitations and in each case, Julie was not doing what most young girls would be expected to do. She was not inside the funeral home

mourning the loss of her family. Instead, she was standing outside the door of the chapel, greeting each of us as we entered. "I'm so glad you came here for Mommy." "Daddy would be so happy that you came." "Thanks for coming to see us. My brother would have been so happy you're here."

Julie stood there at the death of each family member, making a super-human effort to comfort us. She, who had lost everything, had only one concern ... the feelings of others.

In her senior year, I rode with Julie on a bus full of girl basketball players to play a game at a school some distance from ours. It was a long trip and I had chosen a seat beside Julie. I asked her the question that had been on my mind for years. "Julie," I said, "how did you do it? How were you able to go through the death of three family members with only a concern for the rest of us? Were you just acting? What?"

Julie smile at me with those bright, blue eyes and said, "I had no choice. If I had thought only of myself at those times, I would have never made it. I had to become more concerned with others than myself, just to keep my sanity."

I learned a huge lesson from that little girl on a yellow school bus.

Dr. Karl Menninger, co-founder of the Menninger clinic, was once asked, "If you knew you were going to have a nervous breakdown tomorrow, what would you do today to prevent it?" Dr. Menninger replied, "That's easy. I'd immediately go out and find someone to help."

This has been called the "Me Generation." The bookshelves are filled with self-help books that say, "Give yourself a break. Ease up. Live for yourself and not others," yet life experience seems to say the exact opposite. Dr. Albert Schweitzer, one of the greatest humanitarians the world has ever known, said, "The only ones among you who will be truly happy are those who've sought and found out how to serve others."

Dr. Schweitzer, after a lifetime of giving himself in service to others, tells us that we need less self-help books, and more emphasis on how to serve our fellow man.

I recently heard of a young girl in our school who was diagnosed as having Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. CFS, as it is called, is still a mystery to the world of medicine. For no known reason, a person will become too tired to function normally. Even sitting up becomes a wearisome chore. This girl was forced to drop out of school in her sophomore year and her mother became her tutor, reading the girl her lessons each night, then reading a bit of the local newspaper.

One night her mother read her the story of a lady named Janelle and her program called “Weekend Kids.” Janelle was an African-American lady who had discovered that the poorer children of her town had little to eat on weekends when school was not in session to feed them. So Janelle would scrape together whatever money she could find and go out on the street corners every Saturday, handing out peanut butter sandwiches until she had run out.

The young girl with CFS was deeply moved by Janelle’s mission and she asked her mother if she could somehow help the lady with her sandwiches. Her mother knew that such a thing would be impossible but she answered, “We’ll see, dear. We’ll see.” As sometimes happens in God’s scheme of things, someone snitched on her. Someone told Janelle of the young girl’s concern, and on the following Friday evening, Janelle showed up on the doorstep of the young girl, holding a large paper sack in her arms. She asked to speak to the bed-ridden girl.

Her family ushered Janelle into the girl’s bedroom and her tired eyes lit up as the lady opened her sack and began putting loaves of bread on the girl’s chest, along with a knife and a large jar of peanut butter. As the young girl made sandwiches, Janelle told her of the joy the food had brought to the children. She told her stories of their gratitude and even of the jokes they told standing there on the street corner. Janelle packed up the sandwiches, prayed with the girl then left.

I don’t know what happened next. All I can tell you is that a month later the former CFS patient walked into our school. We couldn’t believe it! A girl who a month ago could



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