

A Bonus Section for Our North Carolina Readers

Carolina Living

people & places™

A Raleigh nonprofit is changing
the world, one smile at a time.
see page 25

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Southern Living



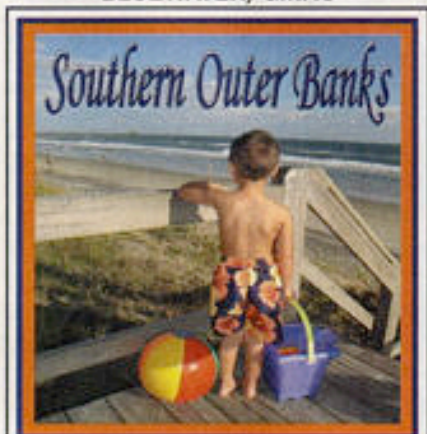
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Volunteer Life

Two young North Carolinians are ready to change the world.

Saving the world starts simply. First, you stand on the side of a busy highway. Next, you hoist signs with the toothy one-word request that suggests smiling. Finally, you demonstrate by flashing your pearly whites at every passing motorist.

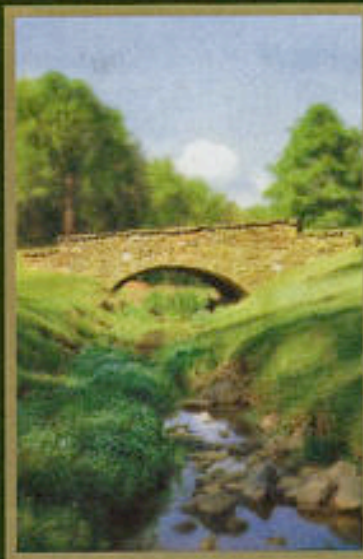
"Smile!" exhorts Heather Leah, 23, directing a hand-lettered sign that reinforces the message at a couple in a dark sedan. "Smile!" echoes Amber Smith, 22, aiming her dazzling beam at a mom driving a van full of kids. The two young women clearly enjoy the reactions they're garnering at this Cary intersection. The "Smile!" project is only one of many promoted by their newly minted nonprofit volunteer organization, ME³, which stands for "motivate, educate, empower, and engage."

If you're unfamiliar with the duo's do-good tactics, standing on the side of the road trying to win smiles from strangers might make you feel as conspicuous as a bright orange traffic cone. But then something happens that knocks down your wall of reservations.

Time after time, stony-faced folks pull up beside the ME³ founders and break into undeniably joyful expressions. The passersby grin, giggle, and even guffaw. The hassle of the daily commute gives way to a happy moment. Smiles beget smiles. ▶

top: Amber Smith (left) and Heather Leah formed the nonprofit ME³ after a volunteering road trip across the country. **below:** ME³ volunteers encourage motorists to "Smile!"





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A Biltmore Farms Community



right: Heather (holding list) and other volunteers review the itinerary for the ME³-sponsored Laser-Tag Benefit Blast at Battlezone. The Raleigh event helped the local chapter of StandUp for Kids.

For best friends Heather and Amber, good intentions—paired with action—paved the path to this sunny side of the street.

An Ugget by Any Other Name

They sit across from each other at a quiet table in Borders, a bookstore on Cary's Walnut Street that serves as the unofficial headquarters for their nonprofit. Years ago, Amber and Heather bonded through their shared global vision. "I wanted to save the world when I was 5," says Heather, pushing back her dark hair streaked with a large swath of blond.

Amber started a save-the-world list at age 12. Heather recalls the day she found her friend's manifesto. "It was a very funny list of things that Amber really planned on changing: greed, hunger, apathy, war—big, big things," Heather says.

"When you're a kid, everything is like superheroes," says Amber about her grandiose ideas. She's currently on hiatus from NC State, but when in school, she focuses on class work



in nonprofit management and social change. "As I grew older, the feeling that I really wanted to do something stuck with me," she adds.

At first, the two visionaries concentrated on what they dubbed "Ugget" activities: feel-good random acts of kindness, such as the roadside smile event. A former boyfriend of Amber's had nicknamed her "Ugget," a term from a computer game. "I was generally annoyed when he called me that," she admits. So she added her own positive twist to what she considered a derogatory endearment.

"The term evolved and became 'a female who wants to save the world desperately,'" she says. Now, the word has come to describe any male or female who shares Heather's and Amber's global goal, and Ugget events—free car washes that are truly free, for instance, or picking up litter while asking passersby to join them—continue to personalize the official, more encompassing ME³ organization.



left: Amber models the ME³ Ugget T-shirt, which defines the term she and Heather coined for anyone who shares their philosophy about making the world a better place.



"I got a call from the Red Cross asking me if I could help provide volunteers. I thought, 'Wow! They are calling little old ME³.' "

Amber Smith

The Road (Trip) From Ugget to ME³

Eventually, the duo wanted to formalize their random volunteerism. They befriended attorney Jeff Marsocci, who agreed to help them form a nonprofit. "In the meantime, why don't you start a Kiwanis Club?" he urged them. They did. "We did lots of volunteer projects in the area before we left on the trip," Heather says.

Ah, yes, the trip. In the fall of 2004, Heather and Amber embarked on a three-month journey, a dog-good adventure called "Ugget, Go Ugg" that stretched from North Carolina to California and back. Armed with \$800, their parents' admonitions, and a car packed with boxed noodles and canned goods, the young volunteers set off on a quest to do good works. "We really needed something that would just make a huge entrance into the world for us," Amber says. Along the way, they donated time and labor to service organizations and asked questions about how different nonprofits work.

The Volunteer Business

"Something we learned is that we have to find a way to appeal to lots of different people if we're going to affect different people," says Amber. ▶



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"I wanted to save the world when I was 5."

Heather Leah

"We need to be professional as well as Ugget—and know when both are needed," Heather continues. "Otherwise, we won't be able to reach the professional people. They will just say, 'Silly girls are running around doing smile projects. That's not going to change anything.' They need cold hard results."

The trip solidified their ultimate goal—saving the world—"but our method of changing it has changed a bit," concedes Heather.

Enter ME³, the fruition of their dream. The organization attained its tax-exempt status in the summer of 2005, complete with measurable goals and all the non-idealistic bells and whistles required in the world of nonprofit.

In addition to its own activities, ME³ also supports the efforts of other charitable organizations. "We take a

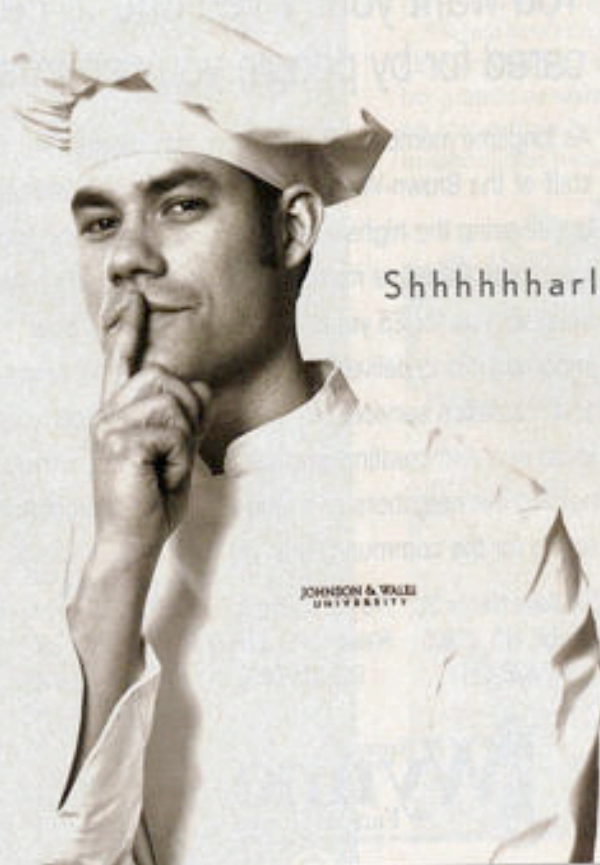
look at our resources and what we can do to meet their needs and come up with a plan," Amber explains. "Do they need more volunteers? Do they need more public awareness about their cause? Do they need help with fund-raising?"

After Hurricane Katrina, ME³ arranged for about 60 volunteers to help evacuees that came to the area find transportation and housing. "I got a call from the Red Cross asking me if I could help provide volunteers," says Amber. "I thought, 'Wow! They are calling little old ME³.'"

ME³ also works with organizations to raise funds and educate the public about volunteer opportunities. "When I was in high school, I didn't know how to get involved," says Heather. "I think a lot of people are like me. They need someone to tell them."



Shane Fitzsimmons, Amber, and Heather peruse a map that Amber made for Heather's birthday. It charts the Ugget road trip across the country.



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One Good Deed Deserves Another

In addition, ME³ still offers its distinctly Ugget activities or, as the Web site describes them, "planned acts of kindness."

Recently ME³ volunteers showed up at the home of an elderly woman to clean her yard for free. "That's a very odd offer," responded the puzzled woman. "I'll pay you \$20." Nope, the Uggets insisted, it's free. As the woman watched the volunteers toil for hours, she opened up a bit to Amber. "This is just a blessing for me," she said. "Seeing you all work shows me that the future will be better because you will make it that way."

Wish Granted

ME³ knows how to throw a party—a grant-writing party, that is. Amber and Heather called a group of volunteers together this past summer, and they all got a lesson in how to officially ask for money. "It was a great way for them to not only learn about grant writing but also to find out more about our organization and how it works," Amber says. "Then we had a really good interview and found out we got the grant in November." The nonprofit received all of the \$5,000 it requested and plans to use it to help publish their new newspaper, the *Save the World Digest*, to fund several educational programs on volunteering, and to bolster the efforts of other nonprofits in the Raleigh area.

right: Heather participates in a free car wash—no donation expected. However, the recipient must promise to perform two good deeds.

"I swear," Heather later reminisced, "she could have been reading straight from the ME³ handbook."

NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

For more information about current and future ME³ events and how to get involved, visit www.me-3.org.



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