

## Simple Acts of Goodwill


PHOTOGRAPHY: J. SAUNCE GIBSON

Gwen Burris lifts spirits by giving bread to those in need. Her children—(from left) Christa, Ashley, Mychal, and James—often help.

Acts of kindness were beacons of light in the dark aftermath of the attack on our nation in September. We are often moved to selfless feats during crises, but self-sacrifice on a daily basis calls for another kind of generosity, one rooted in an abiding belief that every small deed can make a big difference.

These Southerners have seen the profound power of goodwill gestures. Gwen Burris gives away bread. Jim Kuhns maintains a Web site. Sara Anderson tutors. Each of these volunteers overcame the same excuses most of us face when we're asked to give—too busy, too broke, too beat. But a funny thing happened on their way to help others—the benefits gained far exceeded the sacrifices made.

### Giving People Their Daily Bread

Gwen Burris of Charlotte radiates deep faith and quiet commitment. "When I first started, my children were like, 'Mama, what in the world are you doing?'" she says, smiling, as her

### These Southerners overcame excuses and offered to help.

children—Christa, 14, James, 13, Ashley, 11, and Mychal, 8—cluster around her. Gwen admits she also harbored doubts at first. "I thought, 'I look pretty silly out here, standing in my yard every day, giving out bread.'" Yet she knew the task belonged to her after learning of the giveaway program offered by grocery chain Harris Teeter.

So, six days a week, Gwen, husband James, and the children set up two folding tables and a hand-lettered sign that reads "Free Bread." Each day, somewhere between 20 and 60 people pull up to the Burris' home to choose from loaves of bread, bags of rolls, and occasionally, tempting pastry sweets.

Gwen, who homeschools, watches for visitors as she oversees the children's studies. If an unfamiliar face

arrives, she steps out to offer an encouraging word. Many folks share their stories—a mother and father with too many mouths to feed; an out-of-work laborer; a proud woman on a fixed income who always exchanges flowers for the baked goods.

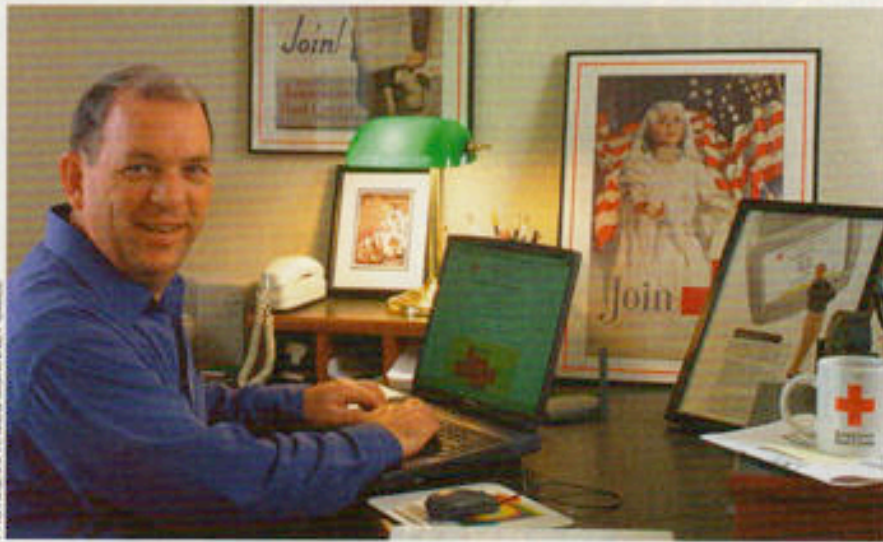
"I thought I would have to wait until I got a lot of money before I could help," says Gwen. "I had some excuses, but then I found out how easy it is. The rewards of doing it outweigh any inconvenience. Everybody can do something in a small way."

### Can-Do Compassion

"The South Texas floods a few years ago hit pretty hard," says Jim Kuhns of Lewisville, Texas. "We needed some special fund-raising, so I did some updates on the Red Cross Web site, getting people to call about donations."

He created the Web site for the North Central Texas chapter of the American Red Cross and maintains it monthly. "If there's any information





“Everybody can do something in a small way. It might just be taking dinner to a next-door neighbor, but everybody should be able to fit in some time where they can do something to give to another person.”

Gwen Burris

available about what the Red Cross is doing with a particular disaster,” he adds, “I put that up there too. People like to know their money did good.” And that is just one of the ways this behind-the-scenes volunteer provides crucial yet largely uncredited help.

Jim is a can-do kind of fellow, reliable, and graceful under pressure. As a colonel in the reserves with the Air Force Civil Engineer Support Agency, Jim’s coolness under fire serves him well at the branch, which specializes in disaster preparedness. Jim took it upon himself to volunteer for 14-day stretches on several disasters in which the Red Cross was involved. The hands-on work helped him to better understand his duties as a Red Cross chapter board member and the scope of the aid provided by the organization. “When I do public affairs on another disaster, I know what those volunteers and victims are going through,” he says.

Why does Jim help? “I like a full life. To me, part of that full life is helping others,” he says.

### Lifetime Learning

Neither Sara Anderson nor Jon Peters spends time dwelling on the disadvantages they’ve faced in life.

Born with congenital nerve deafness, Sara nonetheless earned a Ph.D. in English; taught at the junior high, high school, and college levels; carved out a career as a freelance editor; and cared for her invalid mother for a decade before her mother’s death.



**top, left:** Jim Kuhns volunteers in several arenas, including that of setting up and maintaining a Web site for a local chapter of the American Red Cross. **above:** Each week, Sara Anderson tutors Jon Peters. Sara, who is hearing impaired, and Jon, who has cerebral palsy, share the challenge of living with disabilities.

After her mother passed away, Sara wanted to reach out to other people. She volunteered to tutor at the Adult Education Center for the Jackson, Mississippi, public schools.

Jon, born with cerebral palsy, became her student. Throughout his school career, teachers had mistakenly placed him in special education classes. Once, he asked a teacher to teach him algebra. The teacher dismissed him, saying, “Oh, you don’t need that.” Now, at age 19, bright and ambitious, he wants to reach his full potential.

Despite their disabilities, teacher and student communicate beautifully. “Jon and I don’t have a system—we just manage,” Sara says. “He talks as

loud as he has to, and we just laugh about it a lot.”

Why does she volunteer? “I thought I had an excuse for a while,” she says, referring to the long-term care of her mother. “But if I could go back, I might have started doing this sooner.” She continues, “It makes me feel better. It makes me happy. For a lot of people, doing some type of volunteer work would be better than Prozac. It’s in your own self-interest.”

With their simple acts of kindness, Gwen, Jim, and Sara teach us all how to respond to life’s larger questions—whether it’s our nation’s crisis or our neighbor’s daily need.

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