



ABOVE: Christy Sanderson founded Operation Toy Box which gives "gently loved" toys to children affected by disaster. BELOW: April Reyes began a pizza delivery service and sparked job opportunities for inner-city kids.

Some people search for meaning their entire lives. Fortunately these young Southerners have discovered the gift of graceful purpose while in their teens.

Christy Sanderson of Louisburg, North Carolina, heads a toy collection service for children traumatized by disaster. April Reyes of Norfolk, Virginia, created job opportunities for inner-city youth. Sean Redden of Denton, Texas, listened when a stranger in Finland pleaded for medical help via an Internet chat room. And Chelsea Karpowicz of Alexander City, Alabama, brings moments of cheer to children undergoing the ravages of chemotherapy.

CHRISTY LEIGH SANDERSON AND OPERATION TOY BOX

Bubbly Christy practically percolates when she talks about starting up Operation Toy Box in 1995 at age 16. One day, she and her mother, Carol, watched news of Hurricane Marilyn's devastation in the U.S. Virgin Islands. The camera focused on a small boy with a toy truck and a



PHOTOGRAPHY: GARY CLARK

Meet four inspired young people who've made a world of difference in the lives of others.

blue-and-white whistle. He smiled. And Christy's life changed.

"It was a little bit of hope and happiness," recalls the 21-year-old, who studies communications and business at Meredith College in Raleigh. That night she vowed to send toys she'd outgrown to the children of those islands. In all, Christy and her friends collected 6,000 toys for that first drive.

Today, volunteers gather at a donated building to prepare the toys—some 50,000 since the project began—which will bring play again to children whose worlds have crumbled from tornadoes, hurricanes, fire, and floods. And Christy hasn't forgotten her original reason for starting: "Our whole goal is to make the children smile."

APRIL REYES AND PIZZA-RIA

The kids in the Norfolk Redevelopment Housing Authority (NRHA) communities refer to April, the tiny founder of Pizza-Ria, as "the pizza girl." Now 20 and a student at Old Dominion University,



PHOTOGRAPH: ART MERVOLA

ABOVE: Sean Redden helped a Finnish woman by believing her chat room distress call. RIGHT: Chelsea Karpowicz collects hats for critically ill children who are undergoing chemotherapy.

April has resigned the Pizza-Ria presidency which she'd claimed at age 14.

Back then, local pizza vendors refused to enter the community after a delivery employee was robbed and killed. Jimmy White, a phone company executive, offered to teach the housing development's kids how to run a business—in this case, make pizzas readily available. Pizza Hut agreed to supply the pies.

Caring adults, including Norfolk police officer Tony Mitchell, volunteered to pick up the pizzas from Pizza Hut and transport them to the housing development's adult center, where the kids sold to a grateful neighborhood. The program they cooked up became a hot item.

The kids learned a lot. When Pizza-Ria hit a sales slump, April and the kids suspended their own wages to repay the loan commitment. Now, the thriving business pays ample wages and offers scholarships to area youth.

Today, April still supervises inner-city kids who run the delivery service. She's also involved with other youth businesses that blossomed as a result of Pizza-Ria.



PHOTOGRAPH: BETH DIEHLING

CHELSEA KARPOWICZ AND HATS OFF TO CHEMO

Since 1998 at age 12, Chelsea has presented nearly 100,000 hats to children, most of whom have lost their hair to chemotherapy. A TV show about St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital in Memphis gave her the idea. The kids said "the most tragic part of chemotherapy was losing their hair," explains Chelsea.

Scout troops, celebrities, and sports figures have sent the head coverings. UPS ships the hats (at no charge) to camps for critically ill children and to hospitals. Chelsea and her mother, Tara

Lawhorn, both of Alexander City, Alabama, deliver yet more of the gifts to nearby hospitals.

"They looked so sick," Chelsea recalls about that first hospital encounter. "[But then] we opened all the boxes and the children tried to run to the table when they saw the hats. They were just so happy." She plans to become an oncologist, but for now, she's content to bring such simple moments of joy.

SEAN REDDEN AND AN INTERNET SOS

Denton, Texas, native Sean was logged on to his computer in a chat room when someone sent a plaintive missive, "Help me, I can't breathe." Others dismissed the young woman's cry for aid. "Poof, I'm a healer. You're healed," wrote one.

But Sean listened, perhaps because of his own health problems. He's asthmatic and had surgery for hydrocephalus (water on the brain) at age 3. A brain tumor recently required more surgery.

"I wrote, 'Can you call an EMT?'" the 16-year-old remembers. The person online didn't understand, which made Sean think she was a child. He was stumped when the woman said she was 20.

Then he asked where she was located. "Finland," came the astonishing response. The woman was locked alone in a college library after hours when the strange malady struck. She was partially paralyzed and having trouble breathing.

At this point, Sean's mother, Sharon, called the local sheriff's office, then operators, who began searching for Finnish counterparts who spoke English. Each person contacted stayed on the line as Sean frantically typed questions to the ailing woman so far away.

"A few minutes later, she wrote, 'I heard footsteps running by, but they passed me,'" Sean says. At his behest, the rescuers retraced their footsteps. One final message: "They're here. Goodbye."

Sean still hears from the young woman, who has since been hospitalized several times. As for the attention he's received, he prefers concentrating on keeping his good grades, playing tennis, and working as a "burger flipper."

Nancy Dorman-Hickson