

My Brother's Keeper

by Norma Beasley

TRANSFORMED FROM A JAM-PACKED STORAGE ROOM FOR BOOKS, BOOKCASES, DESKS AND CHAIRS, the small school resource center presented an orderly chaos. Round oak tables were laden with boxes of shoes tagged with student names and room numbers. Bagels, pita bread and wheat loaves rested in large bins. Shelves bowed with books. Stuff under tables. Wooden storage cabinets held school supplies and canned goods. Stuffed animals. A yellow bulletin board screamed, "Teamwork Makes the Dream Work." Ms. Betty Chandler, a former media specialist, was functioning in a new capacity. Community Liaison for Eccleston Elementary. Because the school did not have a viable PTA, this new position promised to be a vital link to the surrounding community.

A frail young woman in her late twenties entered the center during the late morning. Since I normally assist Hispanic and black students and their parents, I was surprised to see a Caucasian enter the room. I did not remember that hunger has no color.

"May I help you?" I asked, approaching her.

"Yes, please. I'm looking for food and clothing for my family."

"How did you know to come here?"

"I just kept asking around until someone told me to try the school around the corner."

Ms. Chandler, a portly black woman driven to succeed, heard our conversation and approached. "We'll be glad to help. Norma, give her two of everything from our pantry."

I grabbed two large cardboard boxes and began to pack one with cans of corn, peas, two packages of mac and cheese, baked beans, soup, and pinto beans. Jenny, as I came to know her, began sorting through T-shirts and a shelf overflowing with sneakers of all sizes and styles.

"How many in your family?" I asked.

“Four of us,” she replied. “My husband injured his foot and couldn’t come. My two boys stayed back too. The three year old has the flu, I think.”

“Where are you from?”

“We moved here from Colorado looking for work and warmer weather so we wouldn’t have to buy sweaters and coats. Things are tough. We didn’t know it would be so bad.”

I put four brand new toothbrushes into a plastic bag along with toothpaste and floss and tucked them neatly in a corner of the box.

“We slept on the hard floor last night with a sheet over us,” she continued.

Luckily a local church had donated several hand-sewn patch quilts and decorative pillows for our pantry which I packed in the boxes. Jenny found a pair of sneakers and some T-shirts for the older boy. Shortly thereafter, both boxes were chocked full of odds and ends for the family and we proceeded to load them onto a red steel dolly. Jenny and I then made our way to the parking lot. She pushed back the door on the passenger side to begin loading the boxes. One peek inside suggested we try putting everything in the back of the van. The inside looked like a rolling trash can. *Maybe they had been living inside the van at one time.*

“Let’s put this stuff in the back. I think there’s more room there.”

“OK,” she said, nodding her head.

We loaded everything in the back and slammed the door shut. “Do you have any money?” I asked.

“No. Our check didn’t come yet.”

“Here’s twenty bucks to help out.”

She thanked me profusely and we gave each other a big hug. Jenny climbed into the van and drove off. Although I never saw her again, Ms. Chandler said she returned with noticeable bruises. *Perhaps her husband had beaten her.*



Allison Olcsvay
Special to the Sentinel

Allison Olcsvay, a UCF student, wrote the following story about UCF’s College of Education and Dr. Suzanne Martin, professor of Exceptional Education at UCF, efforts in assisting Eccleston Elementary in providing food to needy families. Excerpts of which follow.

Title 1 schools, like Eccleston Elementary, serve economically disadvantaged areas and receive additional funding from the state to improve the educational opportunities they provide.

As part of this program, Eccleston runs a parent outreach and a food pantry. The program, staffed by Betty Chandler and a squadron of volunteers, seeks to establish a connection between the community and the school by meeting basic needs such as food and clothing. According to Mrs. Webley, the school’s principal, “if the kids are not fed, and feel safe, we are not going to be able to teach them.”

To this end, Ms. Chandler, a 38-year veteran educator, took on a new role two years ago, to develop the outreach, along with Mrs. Webley and the school staff.

Chandler is the type of woman who greets everyone with a firm hug, no matter how long she has known them, first-time meetings included.

She develops a bond with the families she serves by offering support, encouragement and the stern look of a mother who knows best, if the occasion calls for it.

Ida Leath, a parent who participated in the Thanksgiving meal program said, "She's like a big momma. I love Ms. Chandler to death."

In addition to special help like the Thanksgiving meal, the parent outreach program at Eccleston also helps put families in touch with vital services like health care, eyeglasses or shoes for students.

The home-school connection is vital, according to Ms. Chandler.

"I try to assist the families with any need that will block the students' learning," she said.

The parent outreach program provides GED help for those who may need it. Chandler also allows them to come in and use her computer to search for jobs because many do not have home computers or internet access of their own.

According to Patricia Lyons, one of Chandler's volunteers, the programs also give out free computers to families who need them, assist with winter clothing and blankets and provide other resources like books and school supplies for homework.

Chandler keeps all her parents and grandparents accountable by having them agree to a parent pledge to stay involved with the school. In turn, like a mother hen, she makes calls to check in on her "babies" and make sure all their needs are met.

"At Eccleston Elementary, grandparents raising grandchildren are common and often are active in volunteering in the classrooms and with the outreach program," said Chandler.

Universal Studios Orlando adopted Eccleston Elementary as one of their service projects, donating financial, in-kind and volunteer support that helped the school return to an "A" status.

The First United Methodist Church in downtown Orlando donates refurbished computers and food, as well as clothing and blankets through three of their ministries.

"The additional help they receive from UCF is always welcome," said Chandler. "With the College of Education supporting me, I am able to have plenty of food here as the parents need it."



Portion of school mural

Despite all the struggles Eccleston maintained a “C” or better rating for the last eight years. Three of those years, they achieved “A” status.

Chandler exudes optimism and determination as she says, “We are going to be a school of promise. We are no longer at risk. We are going to be all that we can be, and we are working toward reaching that goal very soon.”

A big believer in the philosophy that *it takes a village to raise a child*, Ms. Chandler said, “It takes the whole community, the whole village and we’re gonna fight and fight and fight until we get there.”

The complete text for this story can be found at www.orlandosentinel.com/community/UCF/orl-ucf-college-education-needy-families-120511,0,7950620.story

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I am a West Virginia native, the great granddaughter of a slave, and a Cherokee Indian. Having lost both parents by the age of three, my grandparents raised me. I have no siblings.

After earning an M.F.A. in art from Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York, my career transitioned into textbook publishing, then continued into the digital publishing environment.

I’m an avid sports fan (basketball in particular) but also enjoy photography, writing, gardening, and traveling. Currently, I am vice-president of my community HOA, a long time member of the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, and tutor reading to disadvantaged youth in the Orange County school system. This year I am participating in Leadership Orange— an opportunity to learn about what it takes to educate 179,000 students every day. From peeks into the classroom to driving a school bus, I am gaining a new appreciation for how a public school district runs and the people dedicated to the students it serves.

The program offers a chance to learn about the quality and breadth of opportunities afforded Orange County children—seeing and hearing about the challenges the nation’s 10th largest school district faces as it pursues more “A” grades for its schools and the district.

Eight half-day sessions cover every facet of the school system with behind the scenes tours, hands-on demonstrations, student interaction, and quality time with the experts in their fields. Sessions are held monthly at schools and facilities all across the county.

I now enjoy early retirement having devoted thirty-five years to making learning fun for kids at Harcourt Inc.

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