

Daily Herald



The Gowdys - cousin Porchia, left, and Marrissa, cousin Quietrice and Joshua - bowled for the first time when Stephanie Seidl, second from left, and friend Aniek Van Vugt visited them in Mississippi.

Courtesy of Jean-Marie Seidl

The Box Project matches volunteers with families living in poverty

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Years ago, Jean-Marie Seidl saw a magazine article on The Box Project that made it sound so simple, so rewarding - so personal - to help a family in need.

Since 1962, the national nonprofit has been matching volunteer sponsors with recipient families living in poverty in rural America.

Seidl signed her family up to be a Holiday Sponsor and was paired with a needy family in Mississippi. All the Seidls had to do was send a box of gifts that would fill a few Christmas wishes for the family.

"We got their letter and expected to see a list of toys for the kids," Seidl said. "Each one of them just wanted a coat or gloves for Christmas."

She, her husband and their children were so moved by the basic needs of the recipient family that they made a greater commitment. They became Family Sponsors, sending a box each month to a family and getting to know the family as they struggled to make ends meet and build a life beyond poverty.

"You might send school supplies in August or clothes as the seasons change," Seidl said. "You really develop a relationship with the family."

The Seidls now are helping their second family and even have driven from their Naperville home to Mississippi to hand-deliver items and spend time with the family they've grown close to. Seidl discusses The Box Project and her family's experience as a donor.

Q. What is The Box Project's mission?

A. To encourage and enrich the lives of families and individuals living in poverty in rural America by establishing meaningful relationships, promoting education and offering material aid.

Q. How does the organization work toward accomplishing that goal?

A. The Box Project pairs sponsors who want to have a long-term relationship with individuals and families living in rural poverty. Sponsors can be families, individuals, or groups and they can write to their recipient family to get to know them, learn from and mentor them. Each month, family sponsors send a box of food, clothing, supplies or other material aid to their match family.

Sponsors are encouraged to learn as much as they can about their family, the region, possible services in the area and other options the recipient family may be able to access. Education is a core value of the project and organizers hope sponsors will encourage family members to seek higher education and better jobs to help themselves reach a higher level of self-sufficiency.

Additionally, The Box Project has Holiday Sponsors who make a one-time commitment to send a box with winter holiday gifts for a family as well as Center Sponsors who send boxes to community centers rather than individual families.

Q. Who does The Box Project serve?

A. It reaches carefully selected areas of rural poverty including the Mississippi Delta and rural communities in Maine, Appalachia (including West Virginia and Kentucky) and the Native American reservations of South Dakota.

Q. When and why did the organization start? How has it grown?

A. Virginia Naeve, a New Hampshire woman, launched the idea in 1962 after meeting Coretta Scott King and learning of the rampant poverty in the Mississippi Delta region. King gave her the name of a family she knew needed help, and Naeve began writing them letters and sending boxes of clothing, food and supplies.

Naeve's friends started pitching in, giving her the idea to pair sponsors directly with recipients. She launched The Box Project, which has helped more than 15,000 recipient families since 1962.

In the past few years, The Box Project has expanded to reach rural areas in Maine, Appalachia and the Native American reservations of South Dakota.

Q. What kind of success has The Box Project had?

A. I am now working with the second family that my family has been matched with. The first family had a success as the teen in the family went to college, completed her teaching degree and was able to secure a job and move out of her grandmother's house to live on her own with her two children.

The second family I was assigned to was a young single mom living in a trailer with her three children. After it burned down, she had to move back in with her mother, who was already caring for a variety of other grandchildren. The grandmother always told me that if it weren't for the boxes of clothes, school supplies and food I sent along with other items, she wasn't sure how she would have made it. She felt proud that her grandkids went to school looking clean and neat.

Q. What challenges does The Box Project currently face?

A. Its first and most successful program is Family Match. After the success of Family Match, it expanded to include Holiday Match, a match only through the winter holidays; and Community Center Match, which matches a sponsor or sponsor group with a rural community center.

Additional programs funded through donations include our Emergency Fund, which provides limited emergency financial assistance to recipient families in times of extraordinary need, a Back-to-School Fund, and an Educational Award Fund providing financial assistance to encourage students to pursue higher education as a means to break the cycle of poverty.

The Box Project relies on generous contributions, grants and membership dues. Additional sponsors and donors are always appreciated.