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## ROCHESTER Eccentric



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### Special delivery 'Box Project' lets local family give long-distance helping hand

Angela Jungwirth has never met her friend, "Pat," face-to-face, yet the Oakland Township woman feels she knows her well.

"The mother is 25-26 years old. And she has a kindergartner, a 5-year-old son. They are in the Mississippi Delta area. She has one class she's finishing right now and she's going to be a preschool teacher."

Jungwirth won't divulge her friend's name - out of respect for her privacy - and prefers a pseudonym to describe the young mother who receives a monthly donation of food, clothing, household goods and toys from the Oakland Township family.

Jungwirth and her three children, Benjamin, 6, Clara, 4, and Charlie, 2, send a box of goods to Pat and her son every month. The two families also exchange letters. They've come to know each other through a nationwide program called The Box Project.

Based in Ormond Beach, Fla., the organization matches contributors, like the Jungwirth family, to recipients, like Pat and her son, who live in poverty-stricken rural America.

"The Box Project started 44 years ago," said Susan Patneau, executive director. "It was inspired by a conversation between Coretta Scott King and a woman from Vermont. They were at a disarmament conference and they were talking about poverty in the Mississippi Delta. The woman from Vermont wanted to know what could be done. Coretta Scott King said to

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start with one family at a time."

The Vermont woman started sending items to a rural family. She found matches for her friends. The concept snowballed.

Today, 5,000 families are matched "and there's room for plenty more," Patneade said.

In addition to the Mississippi Delta, recipients also live on a Native American reservation in South Dakota, in Appalachia and in rural Maine.

About 500 needy families are on a waiting list for year-round help. The organization also matches sponsors and recipients through a holiday project that runs from October through December. It offers scholarships, matches classrooms across the country and maintains an emergency fund for needy families.

The Box Project relies on local churches and social service agencies to screen and refer recipients.

"They know who needs the help and can qualify them for us," Patneade said.

Sponsors, however, can sign up directly through The Box Project Web site, [www.boxproject.org](http://www.boxproject.org), or by phone at (386) 677-8094.

Jungwirth first heard about the project on the Oprah Winfrey Show about six years ago. She liked the idea but wasn't sure she could make a monthly commitment.

"I liked that you knew what you were sending to people and you knew that they were getting it," she said. "And then last year I said, 'I'm never going to feel like I have the money.' I just jumped in and did it."

Her husband, Mark, gave her his blessings to spend the money needed to fill and ship a box every month.

Shipping for a recent box that included books, puzzles, food, Christmas gifts and clothing cost about \$13.

The Box Project doesn't specify how much a sponsor should spend on donations. Jungwirth includes a mix of new and gently used items in each shipment.

"I sent bedding once. I gave them towels when I started out," Jungwirth noted. "It can be practically anything as long as it's in good shape.

"I usually send a little food. I've sent vitamins. They

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always mention things like laundry detergent, toilet paper, things like that. Sometimes I order things online and just have it mailed to them."

Pat writes to her a few times a month and occasionally lists the family's needs.

The letters also create a bond between sponsor and recipient.

"There are some people who have done it with the same family for 30 years," Jungwirth said. "There are people who pay for college for these moms."

One man bought a house for his recipient family. Some buy cars for their families.

"I'm feeling so attached to her now, I don't think I can drop her," Jungwirth admitted. "The person who was on Oprah had gone to Appalachia to meet their family."

She'd like to meet Pat someday, too.

"Those relationships can be lifelong," Patneau said. And they're important to recipients.

While working for a local referring agency in Maine, Patneau brought The Box Project board members together with rural recipients.

"Universally, every recipient said the (monthly) boxes are wonderful, but that the value of The Box Project match is the relationship because 'It's so wonderful to know that someone in the world cares for me.'

"We all want to make a connection," Patneau said. "And if we can help people along the way, it's a bonus."

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