

ARIZONA GOOD NEIGHBOR AWARD WINNERS

2008 WINNER

Reita Hutson

Gabriel's Dream



Meet the Smile Maker

This 2008 Good Neighbor Award Winner says of her Sudanese “sons”: “These boys were so innocent. They knew how to run from lions but not cross a busy street or turn on an electric light.”

By Barbara Ballinger

A supermarket isn't the usual venue for magic to occur. Yet, that's exactly what occurred when Reita Hutson, then a 65-year-old grandmother, introduced herself to Gabriel Kuany, a tall young man from Sudan, Africa, as he carried a mop six years ago. “He glided by me like a gazelle and had the look of an angel,” recalls Hutson, real estate salesperson with John Hall and Associates in Scottsdale, AZ. “I thought to myself, ‘That's one of the Lost Boys I saw on TV.’”

And that's how Gabriel's Dream was born. The nonprofit secures medical care and educational funds for young men known as the Lost Boys, who fled Sudan during civil war in the 1980s. Some were as young as four.

Before long, Huston and Kuany e-mailed and met regularly. “I saw the hell these young men went through. Many saw family murdered, shot at in a river where the water turned red [from blood], or eaten by lions. Yet, they had the joy of the Lord on their faces and were excited about their new lives,” Hutson said.

Kuany recounted his long journey: “We ran from our village when we heard the sound of guns and people dying and saw smoke. We met in the jungle and walked 1,000 miles, often without water, food, or shelter.” Kuany spent four years in an Ethiopian refugee camp, then 10 more in Kenya, before he was resettled in the United States in 2001.

When Hutson asked Kuany what he needed, he replied succinctly: an education and teeth. “If I have no education, I cannot have a successful life. If I don't have teeth, I won't smile good,” Kuany, now 29, recalls. A tribal ritual required the boys to have six lower teeth pulled for initiation into manhood.

Hutson found a dentist to provide free dental implants. When other former Lost Boys saw Kuany's teeth, they begged him to ask Hutson for their own. "Ask your mother to help us. We don't have a mom."

Hutson relished the opportunity to help her new "sons," convincing more than 100 dentists since 2002 to volunteer. One recipient wrote his loving thanks: "No one is ever happy to smile widely if they don't have teeth, but you are bringing back the lost smiles. How incredible!"

As executive director of Gabriel's Dream, Hutson handles most administrative work, fundraising, and publicity from her home office. Since 2007 she has donated \$12,500 and volunteered 2,500 hours.

Through Gabriel's Dream, Hutson has provided more than \$1 million in dental and medical services and awarded \$70,000 in college scholarships. She has also provided thousands of "emergency" dollars to help about 400 Arizona men on the edge of poverty find apartments, jobs, and the security of family, community, and purpose.

"Many suffer from loneliness," Hutson says. "The African culture revolves around family and community. I listen and provide advice and comfort," she says.

Hutson, now 71, plays down her role in their success, noting that the boys deeply affect nearly everyone they meet. Even at a time of hiring cutbacks, area employers seek them out. One Wal-Mart manager, who had hired 12 former Lost Boys, asked Hutson to send more, she says. "He wrote, 'These associates' integrity level is second to none. They are role models for the rest of our employees.'"

Despite his long journey, the organization's namesake remains euphoric about his good fortune: Kuany is studying for a college degree and working as a mental health specialist. Last year, he became an American citizen. Now, he and some other former Lost Boys are working with Hutson to raise funds to build a school in Sudan.

He says none of these achievements would have been possible without the woman he considers his American mother. "I did not know I could meet a mom who could give up time to help me and other Lost Boys," he says.

Hutson believes she's the lucky one. "God chose me to help a beautiful young man bearing the name of an angel. Not a day goes by that I don't feel blessed. They are my sons, and I am their mom. I will help and love them for the rest of my days," she says.

2000 WINNERS

Linda Booker *Christmas Angels*



Tidings of Comfort and Joy

Linda Booker wants no child to be without gifts on Christmas.

By Robert Sharoff

Fifteen years ago, Linda Booker, one of Realty Executives' top U.S. salespeople, was in a very different place.

As the single mother of two small children in suburban Phoenix, she was struggling to rebuild her life. Her former husband was in jail. Christmas was coming and presents were scarce.

She saw the pain and confusion in her children's faces as they struggled to come to terms with the disintegration of their family. "We were pretty much on our own," she says. "I'm a big holiday person--I grew up on a farm in North Dakota, and Christmas was always a very special time for us--but trying to find some joy in that situation wasn't easy."

A year or two later, she read a magazine article about a fledgling charitable organization founded by Charles Colson, the convicted Watergate conspirator who later went on to become a Christian evangelist. The organization was called Angel Tree, and its aim was to provide Christmas gifts for children whose parents were in prison.

"You know how sometimes you read something and it strikes a note in your heart?" she says. "I thought, I have to do something. If I can prevent those kids from going through what mine went through, maybe there was a reason for it all."

She called the charity, which was headquartered in Washington, D.C., and was told a branch was just starting up in Phoenix. "I didn't have a clue about what I was doing," she says. "The first year, we gave 250 presents. I put up a tree at my church and asked the congregation to donate toys, but that wasn't enough. I went to everyone I could think of. One of my friends charged \$600 worth of gifts on his credit card to make up the difference."

But she knew she was on to something when she began making deliveries the week before Christmas. "When you deliver presents, it's a real personal thing," she says. "You take them to the front door and say, 'This is from your mom,' or 'this is from your dad.' And the kids are just wide-eyed. They can't believe they've been remembered."

Flash forward to the present: Last year, Booker's group--which consists of about 150 volunteers from her church, her company, title companies, and lenders--collected and distributed 25,000 gifts to children all over the Phoenix area. Over the years, the group's mission has also grown. The group now also provides presents to homeless children as well as to a number of orphanages and domestic abuse shelters and to adult AIDS and indigent hospital patients.

The group, which Booker renamed Christmas Angels, remains a grassroots effort.

"This is done on a wing and a prayer," she says. "Every year we start fresh in late August or early September. There's no budget." The Good Neighbors prize money, she says, will buy "a lot of Barbie dolls."

Most of the gifts come from Christmas trees set up in about 20 Wal-Marts, Kmart, and Costcos in the area, where customers are encouraged to drop off clothing and toys. Booker and the other volunteers pick up the gifts, wrap them, and then make deliveries starting the week before Christmas.

Up until this year, Booker used her Realty Executives office in suburban Glendale as a combination gift-wrapping and distribution center. This year, however, the company has relocated to smaller quarters, making a warehouse necessary.

"It's a dead run from November 1 when the trees go up until Christmas Eve," she says. "I get up at 5:30 in the morning and I'm at the office until 2:00 or 3:00 the next morning."

Why does she do it? "I feel like I've done three things right in my life," she says, "my son, my daughter, and Christmas Angels. I feel like God's hand is on my head when I do this."

Gil Gillenwater
Rancho Feliz Charitable Foundation



Cultural Crossroads
Easing poverty of body and soul on both sides of the border.

By Sara Pullan Geimer

There's a town not far from Gil Gillenwater's home in affluent Scottsdale, Ariz., where the average wage is \$5 a day--that is, if you're one of the 50 percent who can find

employment. In that border town of Agua Prieta, Mexico, 30,000 people try and fail to enter the United States every month. The result is overcrowding and homelessness, with parents often forced to leave young children in the care of older siblings as they search for shelter and jobs.

It's a cycle of poverty that Gillenwater wants to end. Thirteen years ago, he founded the Rancho Feliz Charitable Foundation. His mission: to keep Agua Prieta's struggling families together and provide for the neediest children. Since then, he's raised more than \$1 million to support orphanages, a soup kitchen, and new home construction in Agua Prieta.

One of the foundation's primary projects is La Divina Providencia, a unique shelter for 30 orphan girls and 20 abandoned seniors. Here, and at the adjacent soup kitchen that feeds 300 people a day, school attendance is mandatory. "Education is the only thing you can give them that somebody can't take away," he says.

Gillenwater's inspiration was born at the dinner table on Thanksgiving Day in 1987 as he stared at more food than he and his family could possibly eat.

"It hit me at that moment that I lived in so much abundance," he says. "And I knew 200 miles from my home there were people who weren't eating at all."

Gillenwater and his brother, Troy, literally got up from the table, bought \$2,000 worth of groceries, and drove south.

On a dirt road across the border from Douglas, Ariz., they came across a sign pointing to Rancho Feliz Orphanage. There, the brothers found a 20-year-old woman caring for eight orphaned children in a building without heat or indoor plumbing. "The children were easy to fall for, but what struck me was the young girl and her devotion to these children," he recalls. They turned over the food and returned home with a new determination to help. Their first fundraiser brought in about \$10,000 to equip the facility with heat, bathrooms, and showers.

"This whole concept of borders is a bit antiquated," says Gillenwater of his cross-border mission. "All children, no matter where they live, should have access to basic needs: Heat in the winter, a place to go to the bathroom, a place to take a shower, and most important, love and security so they don't have to be afraid."

The foundation has since invested more than \$400,000 in La Divina and the nearby Naco orphanage, expanding existing structures, building dormitories, installing indoor plumbing, and adding luxuries such as basketball courts and gardens. Combined, La Divina and Naco house about 80 children, and Gillenwater's mission to help the children still holds strong. But that's only half the story.

As friends and relatives returned from Agua Prieta, where they'd helped build bathrooms or distribute food, "they felt they were returning with much more than they'd taken

down--myself included,” he recalls. “By allowing us to serve, the people of Agua Prieta enabled us to solve our poverty of purpose.”

Gillenwater capitalized on the phenomenon he calls reciprocal giving by building a 4,000-square-foot dormitory for 60 volunteers and developing an exchange program to give volunteers a chance to serve. The program drew more than 1,000 people last year.

But labor isn't Agua Prieta's greatest need: It's funding. “Access to capital is really my company's forte,” says Gillenwater. Many of his contacts in the investment world are also donors to Rancho Feliz. Last year alone, the foundation raised more than \$250,000.

Gillenwater is still delighted by the individual successes. Recently, he helped a girl with an abscessed tooth get dental treatment in the United States. She'd been in pain for two years--and two hours after the operation, she was a new person. “My greatest joy is seeing these borders broken down,” he says. “Now I guarantee her life is changed because she has an expanded vision of what she can do.”

(also a 2006 Honorable Mention award winner)

Jill Rich

American Red Cross



The Calm After the Storm

When calamity strikes, Jill Rich puts people back on their feet.

By Robert Sharoff

It happens all the time—at dinner, during a listing appointment, often in the middle of the night. Jill Rich's pager goes off and she springs into action.

Rich, a salesperson with Realty Executives of Tucson, is a volunteer with the local Red Cross' disaster relief program. One week out of every month she's on call--meaning it's her responsibility to be ready at a moment's notice to provide aid and comfort to the victims of fires, floods, storms, and other catastrophes in the Tucson area.

“Often we get there and people are standing around looking at a burned-down building,” she says. “They're in shock. Usually they've lost everything. Sometimes there's been a death.”

Rich's job is to assess the situation and provide whatever help is needed. “We find them

shelter, give them vouchers for food and new clothes. If they need a prescription for a medical condition, we pay for it.”

The “we” Rich is referring to may be herself or another volunteer, but just as often, it’s the friend or client she was with the moment the pager went off.

“I’ve taken clients to fires before,” she says. “Usually it happens when I’m out on showings. I let clients know in advance that I’m on call and that if they don’t want to come, we should take different cars.”

Rich has been a Red Cross volunteer for about 15 years in addition to being involved in a number of other charitable activities. Back in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, she and her husband, Jim, were active in a refugee resettlement program. They served as temporary foster parents to about 40 Vietnamese children, even adopting and raising two as their own.

“We got completely immersed in it,” she says. “The kids were 10–17 years old at the time. We’re still in contact with many of them.” Today, they mentor refugee families from Bosnia, Russia, and Ethiopia, teaching them about American culture, currency, banking, transportation, and other tools of daily life.

Rich has also gotten involved in a number of charities aimed at homeless people. She’s head of homeless services for the local Red Cross and is also chairperson of the Tucson Planning Council’s winter shelter program, Operation Deep Freeze. The program provides beds, hot meals, and medical services on cold winter nights.

“It’s an enormous, multi-faceted program that gets activated when the temperature is either below 35 degrees or below 40 degrees with precipitation,” she says. “The beds are mainly in churches and other congregations and gymnasiums. Last year, we provided more than 17,000 beds over the course of the winter.”

Rich also is the founder of a program that provides homeless people with basic toiletries and warm winter clothing. She funds the program out of her own earnings. Last year, she and her husband distributed more than 3,000 pairs of socks and gloves, as well as toothbrushes and toothpaste.

Despite spending an average of 20 hours a week on volunteer work, Rich has been named Realty Executives No. 1 Solo Residential Sales Associate for the last two years. How does she fit it all in?

“What I do best is juggle,” she says. “I have no problem going from a disaster call to a listing appointment. That kind of flexibility comes naturally to me.”

The reason, probably, is that Rich has been “juggling” volunteering with her other responsibilities for most of her life.

“I started when I was five,” she says. “I remember it like yesterday. I heard a news report about children not having milk and asked my father--who was active in a number of charities--how that was possible, because we had lots of milk.”

That led to a candy sale (“I sold Hershey bars at his office”), which raised \$3.88 for the local milk fund.

“Volunteering keeps me centered and gives me a more realistic view of the world,” she says. “I couldn’t imagine a life without it.”