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MARCIA MERRICK MOTHER TO THE STREETS

Regardless of rain or snow, extreme heat or the brittle cold, Marcia Merrick is up and at it every morning with a mini-van loaded with brown paper sacks packed with food.

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“There was nobody that was born that said, “when I grow up I want to be homeless,” Marcia says. “This is real life. These are real stories, and those are the people you can change. You can help them and give them a leg up into life.”

This day, her canopy of weather is a constant cover of clouds that are greeted by the snow quickly pounding and covering the streets. She takes her van into the inner most part of the city on a hunt for whoever needs food, bottled water, a hug and comforting words. Each sack has been decorated by a local Girl Scout troop in recognition of Valentine’s Day. Bright pink and red hearts dress up the sacks.

“Nothing stops me from going,” Marcia says. “If the car can move out of the driveway, then I’m on my way.”

But delivering sack lunches to the homeless is only a small part of what Marcia is doing. Parked to the side of her drive, sits a van loaded with furniture and household items.

“Sometimes I have the opportunity of helping someone get on their feet. They’re trying to get a job and maybe they land a place to live. Other people give me furniture and in turn I use this furniture to help them get a leg up. I try to help them get their own place started. I try to make them have a beautiful home and give them a sense of worth. Letting them know that they matter in this world is important.”

“People want to feel their worth, and if I give them a bunch of junky stuff, I don’t think that would make them feel very important. I will go in and clean an apartment to help get it ready for someone and will put cookie dough in the oven because the smell makes the place seem so homey. It smells good to them and not cleaning supplies smell. I know it sounds simple, elementary if you will, but you’re dealing with broken people and you have to give them tools to help them, you have to begin somewhere.”

Marcia works through a program called Reaching Out, Inc., that provides a variety of support services based on the need. ‘Personal contact’ is provided and follow-up happens for up to one year following initial meeting. Services are provided for those on the streets as well as those ‘at-risk’ on a daily basis. Daily services begin at 400+ meals being delivered directly to those on the streets of Kansas City. Additional needs are met on a daily basis such as clothing, blankets, toiletries, medications, rain...
to the Streets
tarps, homeless backpacks, school supplies, and many other basic needs.

Marcia seeks to gain trust and build relationships with those with immediate needs, whether on the streets of downtown or in the suburbs where families have experienced drastic life changes.

Recently recognized by ABC’s ‘The View’ as one of the top 10 “Ultimate Volunteers” in America, and Kansas City’s ‘Kindest Kansas Citian’ Marcia doesn’t see it as an avenue for herself to be honored but a venue to have recognition for the program and how people can help.

“Growing up I knew that caring for people when things for them didn’t seem fair would be my calling. I knew from a young age that feeling unwanted or cast away hurt so deeply that I never wanted someone else to feel like a throwaway. I know everyone in this world wants to be special and loved—when you don’t have that, you sometimes want to give up or choose something to numb the pain. I was blessed, I didn’t choose the addictions. Does that make me better? Absolutely not. I just found peace another way.

When you feel invisible to those around you, you begin to believe you really could vanish and no one would care. So as I look at the people I serve each day, I look into their eyes and see such a need for someone to call them by name, ask how they are, and listen to their heart.”

As the white mini-van pulls down the street closing in on its designated place, it must look like an angel coming in for landing. Soon the van is surrounded by people, of all shapes and color; carrying their knapsacks or pulling their bedding along in a cart—their only possessions on the planet.

“I want them to know that I really do have trouble sleeping at night when it rains or it is horribly cold. I worry when I don’t see them on the street in their usual place. I love giving them hugs when they think you wouldn’t want to touch them. They smell, they’re wet, or just plain dirty. Then they know that it is not about the surface stuff. I am so blessed when they ask how I am doing and seem to truly care. My care is recognized on the street. They know I bring them things that I need; my coat, my gloves are not mine if someone needs them. When they smile, I know in my heart they see through my eyes and that in my actions I am a friend to them like no one else has been.”

Within minutes all the sacks are gone, but none taken without a grateful thank you from each recipient. Discovering bottled water, some start jumping up and down for joy as if you had handed them a gold bar or an Olympic medal.

After checking to see if everyone has gloves, a young girl approaches Marcia. She tells her she is 17 and has been recently kicked out of the house—her mother no longer wanting her.

“If someone knows you care and genuinely shows it, you can make a difference.”

Marcia compassionately listens to her story. Gently taking the hair band from her own hair, Marcia pulls the young girl’s hair out of her face and fastens it with the hair barrette.

“I always listen to their stories. I look at their faces and wonder, is this a musician or an artist maybe? Everyone has something. It’s just been lost by what has become of them.”

Marcia’s cell phone rings, and it’s a client who she has helped get off the streets and into a home.

The caller lets Marcia know she has been called in for a second call-back on an interview. Marcia is ecstatic.

“It’s about re-introducing joy to people and planting seeds of hope. Sometimes I focus back to how I felt when I thought nobody cared about me. If someone knows you care and genuinely shows it, you can make a difference.”

As long as there are homeless people, Marcia will continue to fight so they will know there is someone out there who cares about them.

As she treats each one as her own child, she knows there’s a fine line between helping and enabling. Staying focused on the reason of why she’s there sometimes is the biggest battle.

“I get nothing for this but I get everything from this. You have to listen beyond what they’re saying; because it’s the unspoken sometimes that you need to hear. Look at their eyes, their body movement. Touch their arm gently and let them know—don’t give up. If someone hears that enough, they can start changing but it takes time to replace the old wounds.”

If you or you know of an organization that would like to get involved, Reaching Out Incorporated is a non-profit organization and can be reached via their website at www.reachingoutinc.org.