

PHOTO BY ALAN CRAFT

GIVING THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

By Ruth C. White

- Sweater for Dad: \$50.*
- Stuffed toy for baby: \$28.*
- Silk scarf for Mom: \$73.*
- Gift of charity: priceless.*

As the holidays approach, companies step up marketing campaigns to help us make the confusing decision of what to give to whom. Children who watch commercial TV end up with a bad case of the “gimmies” and “musthaves.” Rushed, frustrated, and sometimes guilty, parents feel the pressure to buy, spend and indulge friends, children and family members.

This year, take the time to slow down and think about what you really want to give your family and friends. Think of the lessons you want your child to learn this holiday season. Think of how you want to feel during those crazy four weeks between Thanksgiving and late December.

What do you give the person who has “everything?” Consider the gift of charity, the gift of hope, the gift of love.

GIFTS THAT KEEP ON GIVING

There are increasing options for giving that is meaningful and for giving that goes beyond the first act of charity.

One of my favorites is **Heifer International**. The 62-year-old organization seeks to end world hunger and poverty by helping people to help themselves. Heifer’s practical and powerful philosophy is that it is better to teach someone to fish than to give him a fish. They operate on the principle that people need to make their own decisions about how to improve their lives. Poor families receive the gift of an animal such as a

goat, cow, lamb or water buffalo, or a group of rabbits, pigs, chickens or bees. The animals provide a renewable source of nutrition to the families, while the excess is sold to generate income and the manure fertilizes crops.

There are many different gift packages, ranging from a flock of chicks for \$20 to a \$500 “knitting basket” of wool-producing animals. Buying another child’s family a rabbit or chicks or baby geese and knowing that family will now have food to eat is a tangible way of giving that children can really appreciate. Your family could even take a trip on a Heifer Study Tour where you can visit a community in which Heifer is working and can see exactly where your dollars go.

For more information or to request a catalog, call 1-800-0474 or visit www.heifer.org.

Another interesting choice for parents is **Charity Gift Certificates or Cards**. You purchase an e-gift card or a printed plastic gift card that allows the recipient to give to one of 75 charities. The option is 100 percent tax deductible, and charities include agencies that work on behalf of animals, children and youth; people with disabilities; disaster relief; or the environment.

For more information, call 732-397-5056 or visit www.charitygiftcertificates.org. This organization operates under the umbrella of the Special Kids Fund, providing special needs programs to disabled children (www.specialkidsfund.org).

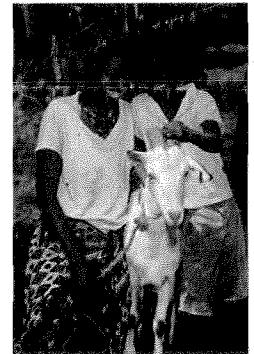


PHOTO BY DARCY KIEFEL © HEIFER INTERNATIONAL

Sponsoring another child may be a long-term commitment, but it builds your child's awareness of the broader world as he sees it through the eyes of another young person. For \$35 a month, your family can sponsor a child through **World Vision**, a Christian relief and development organization based in Federal Way. The organization is dedicated to tackling the causes of poverty and serving the world's poor, regardless of religion, race, ethnicity or gender.

A giving catalog has a range of tangible ways children can give, from \$17 to provide seeds, tools and training to a farming family to \$14 to protect a family from malaria to \$75 to provide a wheelchair to a disabled person or a goat to a family in Haiti or Kenya.

For more information, call 1-888-511-6548 or visit www.worldvision.org.

GIVE THE GIFT OF TIME

Whatever your child's passion – art, animals or the environment – there are ways she can use it to benefit others.

For example, your little artist can give to **Heart-to-Art**, which was founded by Ashley Vargus, an 18-year-old Tacoma girl. The motto is: "Painting better days, one stroke at a time."



Children or adults produce customized art, including paintings, posters, cartoons, cards or even letters, to give to children who are ill or in the hospital. Art is sent directly to the child's parents, the hospital

or to a designated third party. If the parents chose, your child may get to meet the child whose life was touched by her crayons, markers or paints.

For more information, visit www.hearttoart.org, send an e-mail to Ashley@hearttoart.org or write to 4301 Pine St., No. 100, Tacoma, WA 98409.

Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center is always in need of toys for children or donations to their thrift stores, which support the hospital. Fourteen-year-olds can start volunteering at the hospital doing clerical or administrative tasks. Sixteen- to 18-year-olds can volunteer for many other activities that involve direct client contact. For more information, call 206-987-2155 or visit www.seattlechildrens.org.

The **Seattle/King County Humane Society's Young Volunteers Program** offers many ways for young people to help animals. They can hold a pet food drive or a cat or dog toy drive, coordinate a coin drive or host a fundraiser. They can knit blankets for cats at the shelter or bake biscuits for dogs. Or they

can foster an animal awaiting adoption. Young people ages 13-15 can join The Humane Teen Club.

The Humane Society, now located at 13212 S.E. Eastgate Way in Bellevue, first opened in 1897 and is more than an animal shelter: Staff members and volunteers provide a wide range of services to support the relationships of pets with people. For volunteer information, call 425-641-0080 or visit www.seattlehumane.org.

Animal lovers can also adopt a **Woodland Park Zoo** animal and contribute to its care for \$25-\$100. The \$25 level provides online certificates only; the \$50 and \$100 levels include pictures of your animal, water bottles and other goodies. (The adoption process is online; a parent will need to help.) Teens in grades nine through 12 can volunteer for the Zoo Corps to provide conservation education to younger children. For more information, call 206-684-4800 or visit www.zoo.org.

Budding environmentalists can help take care of a stream through the **Adopt-A-Stream Foundation**. Members of the nonprofit environmental education and habitat restoration organization teach people to become stewards of their watersheds. You can also purchase a brick with your own inscription to become a part of the Streamwalk, which will "flow" from the Northwest Stream Center in Everett to the surrounding restored wetlands. For more information, call 425-316-8592 or visit www.streamkeeper.org.

Giving does not have to involve an official organization. Visiting a nearby home for the elderly may help children strengthen their own connections with grandparents they may rarely see. Visiting a sick child in the hospital and giving him a stuffed animal to help him through a rough time is something a child can relate to. It gives a human touch to charity that a check or a toy drive cannot give.

For adults and children, making gift certificates of time brings us closer together to the ones we love and care about. For example, giving the gift of babysitting hours to another parent who may have no family nearby touches the hearts of both parties. Try giving your child gift certificates of time that force you to leave work early or take you away from the computer screen. Try giving a specific number of hours playing together with the child's favorite toy or game, doing a sewing project, playing or learning a sport together, or following whatever passion your child may have.

The goal of alternative or charitable giving during the holidays is to put the spirit of sharing and heart-felt generosity back into the commercial mayhem of the season. Your family's giving experiences can help your children begin to think about the world in a different way.

Ruth White is a Seattle-based freelance writer and professor of social work at Seattle University. She is the mother of 9-year-old Maya.