



### Random Acts of Kindness

Part of my training to become a military pilot took place at a Naval Air Station in Meridian, Mississippi. After driving around in Mississippi it didn't take long to figure out that growing up in a rural small town there would be a challenge. There were (and presumably still are) some very poor areas that did not offer much hope in the way of education and subsequent work opportunities.

Larry Stewart was born in poverty in Bruce, Mississippi, a small town in the real boondocks, a hundred and fifty miles north of Meridian. He was raised by his grandparents, who struggled on \$33 a month and commodities, to provide him the meager necessities, replacing the worn-out soles of his shoes with cardboard. They heated water on a stove and had an outhouse. His grandfather died when he was eleven.

In 1971, Larry was working as a door to door salesman. His company went out of business, and in a short time what little money he had was gone. He had no family to turn to. He was hungry, cold, homeless, embarrassed, and in the lexicon of fighter aviation, "out of airspeed and ideas."

He straggled into the Dixie Diner (what a name, I can see it now just like it was yesterday!) without a nickel to his name, and ordered breakfast. He put on a great performance of "I can't believe I lost my wallet!" The owner of the diner could see the ruse, gave him \$20, and said "You must have dropped this." Larry paid his bill, headed out of town, vowing that "If I ever get into the position of helping others, I will."

A year later he packed all his belongings in one suitcase, got on a bus and headed west to Kansas City. He just couldn't figure out how to make a living, struggling for years while marrying and having children.

Wanting to be in business for himself, he borrowed a significant amount of money, but the business failed. He was fired from jobs the week before Christmas...twice! He saw himself failing—as a parent, a businessman, and husband. He even considered robbery as a way out.

Right before Christmas, in 1979, he gave a waitress a \$20 tip because she "looked like she needed it." Although he didn't have much money himself, he liked the feeling, went to the bank, got \$200 in five and ten dollar bills and rode around giving them to people in need.

Through perseverance, his business fortunes improved and he continued his holiday giving as the Secret Santa, nobody knowing his identity, not even his wife and family at first. This has gone on for twenty five years, and he has anonymously given away over 1.3 million dollars – to needy individuals in hurricane ravaged Louisiana, post 9/11 victims in New York City, and hundreds of small towns in between. Along the way he built a YMCA and then gave scholarships so poor families could join. He supports the Salvation Army, ALS Foundation, and the National Paralysis Foundation. He doesn't give just at Christmas . . . it's a 24/7 thing. Most of the giving is done personally with \$100 bills, truly random acts of kindness.

He finally, just this year, let his identity be known (he was on the Oprah Winfrey Show in disguise to keep his anonymity). He wanted the attention to be on the joy of giving and not on him individually.

The reason he's "coming out" is because he has been diagnosed with advanced cancer of the esophagus and liver. He wants his legacy of giving to live on through others. George Brett, Hall of Fame baseball player, and tough guy Dick Butkus, one of the all time great linebackers, are some of his "elves".

We live in a time where there is a lot of skepticism about the motives of anyone who gets as much attention as he has. I think it's safe to say, after 25 secret years and 1.3 million dollars (after tax no less!) that he has earned the accolades and thanks now coming his way.

And where did all this start? ... a \$20 gift from Ted Horn, owner of the Dixie Diner in tiny Bruce, Mississippi. Several years ago Larry Stewart returned to find the man who had such an impact on his life. Ted Horn was in need...Larry gave him \$10,000. There has never been a better example of what goes around comes around.

**LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE:** What can we do this holiday season, what random act of kindness, to help someone in need without expecting recognition?



I encourage your response to these thoughts. [farlgroup@aol.com](mailto:farlgroup@aol.com)

Have a great day!

Please forward this on or send us the e-mail addresses of co-workers, friends or family members who might enjoy a monthly leadership thought.