

A Season of Small Miracles

... just a couple of days ago, [Katie] stopped by my chair and announced, with truckloads of blessed assurance, "Daddy, I'm going to Chapel Hill and Duke this year." I'm sure Katie has no real idea how to get to Duke or Chapel Hill, but she knows they have sick kids there, and that's enough for her. Come December, I'll show her where they are.

It seems impossible that it could have been a year since I wrote those words, and yet the date was there along with my signature, January 14, 2010. Unbelievable. And yet, you'd think that at some point I'd become accustomed to the seemingly impossible coming to pass. I've certainly seen it happen often enough, and yet each time it's still a surprise, and I inevitably find myself wondering how in the world it could have happened. I'm not complaining; there are lots of feelings worse than surprise that one can have. But I'm surprised so often – almost continually – that it sometimes becomes a bit embarrassing. It would seem likely that by now I'd have come to expect my cup to overflow, rather than to be forever trying to dry my pants with paper towels in the men's room. But some things are hard to explain, and that's just one of many.

In any case, I've been surprised a lot during the past year, and for the last three months or so, it has been virtually non-stop. I call it "chronic surprise", almost as if it was a disease, and on some level, it may be just that. Perhaps we can revisit that idea a bit later, but for right now I want to tell you a little about Katie's Kidz activity leading up to Christmas 2010.

To begin with, against her goal of \$15,000 (which seemed impossibly high to me), Katie raised just over \$15,700, but she didn't stop there. Through character band-aids drives, she collected approximately 500 boxes of band-aids with an estimated retail value of over \$1500, and she prepared 360 bags of personal toiletries at an estimated \$6 to \$8 per bag or at least \$2500 total value. Toy drives for Katie's Kidz sponsored by Little Otter Swim Club, Providence H.S. Key Cub, Covenant Day Lower School, Elements Massage Day Spa, Tirzah Presbyterian Church, and a second grader named Timmy who donated all the gifts that he got at his birthday party yielded over 500 additional gifts valued at well over \$5,000, and pushed the total value of contributions to Katie's Kidz for 2010 beyond the \$25,000 mark – considerably more than twice the total of 2009. Individual contributions ranged from \$5 to \$1,000 with an average donation of approximately \$50. Interestingly, the \$1000 donation came from a couple who had never met Katie and had only heard of Katie's Kidz a few days earlier, but Katie and her story had touched their hearts and made them want to contribute in a special way. So not only did they make the largest single contribution of the year, but also came and loaded boxes on Packing Day.

By the way, that \$5 donation also came with a story – a little note which said, "I am at work and read about Katie's Kidz on the [internet]. I absolutely had to donate after reading her story. I wish I could give more, but I've already exhausted my Christmas budget. My step-son has Type 1 diabetes and asthma, so I can relate to having to spend holidays in the hospital. Please thank Katie for having such a wonderful vision and the endurance to see it through! God Bless!" We never know all the details of anyone else's

situation, but this story brought to my mind the parable of the widow and her two mites. The gift this young lady sent was worth far more than money.

I will not go deeply into Katie's fundraising efforts during 2010, but it's worth noting that she spoke about her Kidz to nineteen church congregations, school groups, and Sunday School classes, as well as to three Rotary Clubs, a Kiwanis Club, and the Union County Board of Commissioners. Needless to say, I got very good at setting up computers, projectors, and microphones as we criss-crossed the Piedmont doing presentations. During the fall, she often had three or more Kidz functions in a week along with full-time school and homework, and just about the time that we all were completely exhausted, December came around and we had to speed up – considerably. That however, is jumping ahead, something I am trying very hard to avoid.

Katie's typical presentation went like this. First, she would introduce herself and tell why she was there, and then she would show her video from WLOS-TV (Asheville), where she was Person of the Week on Christmas Eve of 2009. She would follow the video with a PowerPoint slideshow of approximately 125 slides, which she would comment on as she clicked through them. The final part of the presentation was a questions and answers session that would last as long as the questions kept coming and was often the most enlightening and enjoyable part of the program. Katie quickly became very good with this format, and I thoroughly enjoyed watching her effect on her audiences – particularly the adult ones. They would come in with this "I've seen cute kids before" look on their faces and very low expectations of having a really good program, but then Katie would stand up and speak out like a professional on the circuit, and they would sit down their coffee cups and get quiet. The video would knock them for a loop, and some would even shed tears. Then Katie would begin the slideshow – the fundraising, the speaking, the shopping, the campaign letters, the thank-you notes, the newspaper and radio interviews, the TV appearances, the deliveries to hospitals all over the state. People's eyes would get wide. Their heads would shake. Their mouths would drop open. They would comment in disbelief to the person beside them. The program directors, who had invited Katie, would stop looking nervous and begin to smile as they realized they had knocked one out of the park. And a group of 25 to 100 or more adults would be hanging on every word from the mouth of a nine year old. Katie would make a joke, and the room would crack up. She would give an explanation, and you could hear a pin drop. She would come to the last slide, and the applause would be overwhelming. The questions would begin. Katie was no longer a child; she was an accomplished speaker and an expert on the needs of hospitalized children, and it would begin to dawn on people that something wonderful had happened. Hearts would open. Wallets and checkbooks would open. People would mill about in a soft, warm glow like children while Katie spoke to everyone individually. Then the stories would come out, the stories that never got told – stories about children or grandchildren – about some who died, some who recovered, and some who even got Christmas presents in the hospital. There would be hugs and pictures and exchanges of phone numbers and e-mail addresses. And later, there would be thank-you notes and follow-up e-mails, but by then, Katie would have spoken to several other groups, and this small miracle would have been repeated in the hearts of dozens, if not hundreds, of other good folks by then.

And that's just the way it was – that is until we got the curve ball. A church wanted Katie to come and speak, but they didn't have time for the video and slideshow. They just wanted Katie to stand up and give a short talk. This was something totally different, and I knew that we had to have some sort of framework to replace the structure of a PowerPoint presentation. I asked Katie what three main topics she wanted to cover, and as she talked I wrote them down. Then together we came up with four or five important points to go under each main topic. To this bare bones outline, we added an opening and a closing that she would memorize, and we printed it all out in very large type, so that it could be easily followed by a series of quick glances. Katie talked through it a couple of times to make sure that she had all the figures and dates fresh in her mind, and off we went to church. I knew I was in for a surprise. I just didn't know whether it would be a good one or a bad one. As it happened, it was better than good. Katie stood and spoke with oodles of poise and polish, referring to her notes only occasionally and discretely. I was incredibly pleased (not to say relieved). However, I was not prepared for Katie's remark to me after the service. "Daddy," she said, "I really like speaking that way, and I want to do all of [my presentations] like that from now on."

We got feedback along the way that kept us going, like this hand-printed little note from a child who heard Katie speak to a local Baptist church. "I enjoyed you coming to speak over at First Baptist! My grandparents made out a check for you that I sent. I hope you can come back to speak again! P.S. Merry Christmas." Then there were others, like an e-mail from a gentleman saying only, "I met a saint today", and one from a grandmother that read, "I am a Mom-Mom of nine grandchildren, and I have 'shared' you with all of them. You are truly blessed that God has made you His 'Gift to Children.'" There were lots of good ones, of course. My personal favorite was one from a fellow over in Matthews who wrote: "Dear Katie, My name is Robert. I am 84 years old. I have no way of knowing what children are in need of at Christmas time. I read about you in the paper, and I cried. I know the money enclosed will help the children. God bless you and your cause." The note, written on butterfly stationery, was carefully folded around his check for \$100.

Lots of people read about Katie in the paper – especially an exceptional article by David Perlmutter in the Nov. 29th issue of *The Charlotte Observer*. That article was picked up by the A.P., and we began to get donations from all over the place – Florida, Massachusetts, Texas, Tennessee, even California. By the time Christmas actually arrived, Katie had received donations from people in seventeen states and two foreign countries, and for most of them, it was their first time contributing to Katie's Kidz.

With the arrival of December, we began to shift our energies from speaking and fundraising to shopping. Well, the shopping really began with the Back to School sales of late summer – 21 dozen boxes of crayons, cases and cases of colored markers, pencils, scissors, and school boxes – all of the art supplies we could find, at the lowest prices of the year. A bit later, we found Disney "snuggies" at Costco, and bought 3 buggies full. We quickly filled our storage space to overflowing, and it was still months until Christmas. Then the toiletries started coming in – 4 cases of small packages of Kleenex

tissues, carton after carton of Old Spice and Noxzema disposable razors, boxes of toothbrushes and toothpaste, cases of hand lotion, and bag after bag of small bottles of shampoo, conditioner, and bars of soap unwittingly contributed by almost every hotel chain in the nation – and the real shopping hadn't even begun.

Just before Black Friday, we rented a 9 X 10 mini-warehouse, and I couldn't help but to wonder whether it was too big or perhaps a waste of money altogether. However, I didn't have to wait long for an answer. On that magic shopping day, our alarm clock sounded at 3:30 AM. Elizabeth went to wake Katie with both of us expecting that it'd take half an hour to coax her out of bed, but to our surprise, she popped right out and began putting on the clothes we'd laid out the night before. I looked at my watch as we walked into Target; it was 4:16! From Target, we headed on to Wal-Mart. By the time we'd finished there, it was time for breakfast – and time to unload the van at the mini-warehouse. After that, we visited Michaels and Toys-R-Us. Then, in the afternoon, we hit several other Target stores and Wal-Marts to pick up items that the first stores had already sold out of. Afterwards, it was time for another trip to the mini-warehouse. Stopping only for two quick meals on the run, we had shopped for 13 hours that day, and by the time our purchases were added to the things we had already transferred to the mini-warehouse, it was starting to look lived in. Perhaps the most amazing aspect of that amazing day was that, through it all, Katie didn't utter one word that could be considered a complaint. Of course she got tired, but she never slowed down. The next day, we did the same thing again – not quite as early and not quite as long, but still at the end of the day, we had another vanload of gifts to deposit at the mini-warehouse, and I began to wonder if the unit was going to be big enough.

Even as we continued shopping in every spare moment, Elizabeth began working out a delivery schedule for the hospitals, making commitments to deliver toys many of which hadn't been purchased yet, because donations to pay for them hadn't come in yet. But Katie steadfastly maintained that it was all OK, and we had no choice but to proceed as if it was all really going to happen. Jean Gordon of *The Daily Courier* in Forest City, NC, did a great, front-page article about Katie, and it was followed by an excellent one in the *Union County Weekly* by Josh Whitener. Donations continued to come in – 8 to 10 of them lots of days, and in mid-December, her \$15,000 goal finally came into view. It was about this time that we rented a second mini-warehouse, a 3 X 9 one this time.

Packing Day 2010 was just around the corner, on Saturday, Dec. 18th, and Elizabeth was still deeply into the delivery schedule – working around hospital staff's vacation days, lining up vehicles and drivers for the individual trips, and trying to leave enough time in the schedule for us to decorate a Christmas tree and to wrap and exchange our own presents for each other. At the time, it was a toss-up as to whether that would happen or not, but I was becoming accustomed to things working out, so let's just say I was hopeful.

Katie had been saying for weeks that we needed a big truck to haul the presents from the storage units to the fellowship hall at Weddington Church. She even thought that someone would be willing to donate one, although Elizabeth and I knew better. With that

being the case, it was a surprise bordering on shock when we received a call from one of Elizabeth's customers offering us the use of their package delivery truck to transport our load of presents. I was dumbfounded, and I could hardly wait to tell Katie about the truck when she got home from school. "We had a special donation from Radiator Specialty Company today," I told her. "Guess what it was." "A big truck," she replied without hesitation. "I knew we'd get one." I'm not sure whether I was more surprised by the offer of the truck or by Katie's response to the question, but both were typical of the season that I'd begun to think of as the Season of Small Miracles.

On Packing Day we met at 8:00 AM at the mini-warehouse. The big truck was already there, so we began to load immediately. Packing was scheduled to begin at the fellowship hall about 3 miles away at 9:00. As it turned out, it took just over an hour to load everything, and we arrived at the fellowship hall at about 9:10. By the time we had unloaded a few cartons, there were 20 or more eager elves at our North Pole toy factory, and more were coming in all the time. In all, 81 volunteer helpers came out – most of them with no experience in sorting, packing, and inventorying toys. But they were there, and they learned quickly. Veterans of Packing Day 2009 led teams, and we worked like crazy. Slowly the mountain of boxes shrank as carton after carton was opened and the contents were piled out onto tables. From that point it was a blur as items were labeled, carried to the hospital sorting tables, repacked, and then inventoried. As cartons of sorted gifts became full, they were loaded onto a buggy, and when a buggy was full, it was unloaded back onto the truck. I was amazed at how well the system worked and how quickly the work was done. I had expected to be packing until late in the evening, but the group handled over 5,000 presents and put together 360 bags of toiletries in time to have a late lunch and then go home – yet another small miracle in a Season of Small Miracles.

On Sunday we worked from daylight until bedtime processing late donations, preparing thank-you notes, and straightening out a snafu in our i-Pod order; however, we did take timeout to buy and then decorate a Christmas tree. Monday morning it was a vanload and two pick-up truckloads of gifts to Levine, and Monday afternoon we took two vanloads to Hemby at Presbyterian. On Tuesday, we headed out early, made a stop at Bethel Elementary School in Midland to pick up about 150 boxes of character band-aids that had been collected by the school's Safety Patrol, and then drove on to Duke with a vanload and two mid-size SUV-loads of gifts. On Wednesday, we delivered to CMC Union and Jeff Gordon Children's Hospital while on our way to Chapel Hill with two vanloads of toys. (Yes; Katie went to both Duke and Chapel Hill. I recall that when she went to Chapel Hill, Katie wore a beautiful, Carolina blue, Tarheels jacket – the only delivery of the year that she deviated from her traditional Christmas red.) Then on Thursday, we took a vanload and a pick-up truckload to the kids at Mission Children's Hospital over in Asheville. It was an "eventful" ride, and we got home very late.

At some point, people in New York heard about Katie and her Kidz, and we got phone calls on the road from ABC News and CNN. There had already been short pieces about the Kidz on WSOC, WCNC, Fox Charlotte, and News Channel 14, but we'd only dreamed of national coverage. ABC wanted to do a "skype" interview from our home with Katie on Monday, the 27th, for a web-based news program called "The

Conversation” with Diane Sawyer. Thank Goodness, that was still a few days away, as neither of us knew the first thing about how to skype. However, we took it for granted that we’d be able to figure it out in time. But the CNN request was a different matter all together. They wanted a studio interview with all three of us the following morning – Christmas Eve. There was nothing to do except set the alarm clock for 4:00 AM, say a prayer, and go to bed.

As the sun came up the following morning, we pulled into the parking lot of LiveShot Carolina in Charlotte for our introduction to the world of national broadcasting. Lorri, the make-up artist, began immediately, and Katie was totally thrilled – face, hair, the whole works, just as if she’d been a star. Then it was Elizabeth’s turn for the treatment, and then mine. No, they didn’t save the best for last. Think of it more like triage on the battlefield. I was the hopeless case that you work on only after you’ve finished with everyone else. Still, she took the shine off of my nose and forehead, covered a spot on my lower lip where a fever blister had almost healed, and fixed a frizzy place in my hair. Then, with the body work out of the way, we were ready to get wired in with headsets and microphones. The uplink to CNN had already been established, and suddenly it was time for our debut on national TV. Well, it was a debut for Elizabeth and Katie, but I’d been there before – that is if you count the time back in 1976 that my left knee was shown for about half a second on Saturday Night Live.

It was a good interview and a great experience. Of course Katie did most of the talking, and Elizabeth and I somehow managed to handle our questions when they came to us. When it was over, the professionals on both ends of the hook-up said that it had gone fine and they were quite pleased. For me, the best thing about it was that we’d all been there together, as a family, and Katie had the opportunity to tell millions of people around the world about her Kidz. Those opportunities are few and far between, and they are all special.

From the studio, it was a quick trip back to our house to take the DVD I’d left recording out of the machine, grab our presents, and head to Mama’s house in Ellenboro for Christmas dinner. Along the way, we stopped in Shelby and left a load of gifts for the children at Cleveland Regional Medical Center. We missed dinner, but we did get there in time to see everyone and exchange presents, and we were even able to stick around for an hour or so and visit with Mom and with my nephew and his wife who were up from Birmingham, AL. Then it was back to Monroe for a late Christmas meal and presents with Elizabeth’s family, and then it was finally time to go home. Fortunately, Katie passed out fairly quickly from exhaustion, and Elizabeth and I were able to wrap gifts and fill stockings before we did the same. The end of the busiest day of the busiest week of my life had come, and it was time for a long winter’s nap.

As you may have guessed, the skype interview came to pass. The webcam we bought at Costco worked well, and Katie’s Uncle Jim helped us set up a skype account and then walked us through a trial run. When the time came, we were once again ready for a foray into the unknown. Katie was at the top of her game, as she sat in front of the computer in my office and talked face to face with David Muir at the ABC studio in New York. It

was an outstanding interview, and lots of fun for all of us – a great way to close out the Season of Small Miracles that had begun so long ago.

Stories like this do not have endings, or at least we hope they don't. As Katie says, "Katie's Kidz is God's ministry, and we just have to wait and see where He'll lead us next." Do I have any idea where that might be? Well, Katie has talked quite a bit about visiting the Brenner Children's Hospital at Baptist Hospital in Winston-Salem, and she's also mentioned Charleston and Columbia, SC. Who can say? We have an e-mail from a student nurse in California who wants to start a Katie's Kidz chapter in the San Diego area, and an invitation from a lady in New Jersey for Katie to come up there and speak to a group of churches. A radio host named Jerry Woods, who interviewed Katie earlier, has invited her to come to the 106.9 FM (The Light) studios in Black Mountain for a live, follow-up interview whenever she's ready, and she's already scheduled to speak to the students of Covenant Day Middle School in Matthews on February 2nd. In the spring, she'll be the featured speaker at the annual conference of the Greater Charlotte Area Christian Schools, and several other organizations have expressed a desire to have Katie speak and to sponsor toy drives for Katie's Kidz during 2011, so there are lots of opportunities. And as long as there are opportunities, there is the possibility for yet another Season of Small Miracles in 2011.

God bless you all,
Dean Greene

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