

## Katie's Story...

It was Friday, December 14, 2007, and my daughter Katie (then six years of age) and I were walking the holiday aisles of WalMart when I became aware that Katie had stopped some distance behind. As I made my way back to her, I noticed that she was holding a small Teddy Bear – one of the “Care Bear” series. “Find something that you like?” I asked. “Daddy”, she began, “I was walking by, and I noticed these toys, and I got this idea in my head – ‘If I could give one of these [toys] to all the sick children, they’d feel better and they could have a happy Christmas’”. “That’s a big thought,” I replied. “Maybe a little bit too big. Let’s talk about it some more when we get home.” She agreed, and that was that, or at least I thought it was.

Later that evening, Katie discussed her idea with her mother, Elizabeth. She was very supportive of the idea, but she carefully pointed out to Katie that it would be up to her to raise the money. She also cautioned Katie that world-wide was probably not the best place to start. Together Elizabeth and I convinced Katie that it might be better to start with kids close at hand and give the idea an opportunity to grow. Elizabeth suggested starting with the kids at the Levine Children’s Hospital [part of Carolinas Medical Center in Charlotte, NC] who couldn’t go home for the holidays, and after brief discussion Katie and I agreed. The hospital staff lets as many children go home for the holidays as possible, but even so, there are always many who can’t go home. Those children, the ones too sick to travel, many from out of town or out of state, perhaps from families whose economic resources have been exhausted, and some who might never leave the hospital alive, those children – the ones left behind – would be Katie’s target group.

In three days, Katie raised \$162 (including money she’d been saving for almost a year to buy a puppy), and on Wednesday, December 19<sup>th</sup>, we all went to the hospital where she presented Ms. Deana Williams, the Coordinator of Volunteer Services, two huge Santa bags filled with presents – an event Katie described later as “the best time of my life.”

From my notes of Katie’s project, I wrote a story that I called “Led by a Child”, which was published in “The County Edge” (Union County –Monroe, NC), on December 28<sup>th</sup>. This resulted in a flurry of phone calls and e-mails from people congratulating Katie for her accomplishment, many expressing their desire to contribute if she should decide to do it again in 2008. We kept all of these contacts, and others we had recently developed, against the possibility that she might really want to do it again, but being familiar with the attention span of a six-year-old, we estimated the chances of that happening at not better than 50:50. But Katie is a special kid, and it didn’t take her very long to convince us that 2007 was only a beginning.

On Valentine’s Day 2008, Katie received several cards containing money – all of which she stuffed in a jar for “her kids”. Then on her birthday in July it was the same thing. In fact, it was the same thing all year – whenever Katie got money, into the jar it went. Elizabeth and I caught the habit and began to drop in our pocket change, maybe a dollar bill now and then, and the idea stayed alive. But if there were to be presents for Katie’s kids in 2008, there were two things we had to do: get the word out to

everyone who might want to make a contribution, and make it easy for everyone to get their contribution back to us. We opened a savings account for Katie and set her up a web page under the name of [KatiesKidz.org](http://KatiesKidz.org). We also secured the e-mail address of [KatiesKidz@gmail.com](mailto:KatiesKidz@gmail.com), and with those key items in place, we were ready to begin the process of getting the word out.

Katie wrote a letter introducing herself, telling her story, and asking for contributions, and on November 2nd, we sent it out, in her own hand, to some 130 contacts. And as hits began to register on her website, the money began to come in, and Katie responded to each contributor with a personal thank-you note. Then, after considerable discussion, Elizabeth and Katie set the project goal at \$2008, and I swallowed hard. I'd hoped she'd go for something like \$1000 (maybe \$1200), but not Katie. She had no doubt of making her goal. In fact, she went a step further and added that she hoped to buy an i-Pod or two for the older children. Of course Katie had no idea what an i-Pod costs.

After Thanksgiving we sent out a follow-up e-mail advising people of the goal and her progress and thanking those who'd already contributed, and over the next several days, contributions continued to come in – slowly but steady. Then on December 9<sup>th</sup>, on the way to school, Katie decided that she wanted to call New Life 91.9 FM, and tell Gary Morland about her kids. This event proved to be a milestone, and [KatiesKidz](http://KatiesKidz.org) shifted gears. Mr. Morland edited his conversation with Katie into a very nice two-minute interview, which he then aired several times during the next couple of days. Hits on the website spiked and contributions followed accordingly, this time coming mostly from people we didn't know. And they came with stories of their own – many of them heart-warming or gut-wrenching. Like the married couple from Marshville, NC, who met when they were kids at Camp Care, a summer camp for cancer patients. They retold Katie's story on their own website and added a button to take people to Katie's. And a gentleman from Matthews, who'd lost a teenage son to brain cancer, sent Katie a check for \$200 and offered to help her with future fund-raising. Katie's story was touching people's hearts.

I called "The County Edge" and told the associate editor some of Katie's story, reminded her of the "Led by a Child" story they had published the previous year, and asked if they'd be interested in doing an article. The owner of the paper came to our house and talked with Katie for almost an hour – a conversation which resulted in a front page feature with two large, full-color pictures in their December 12<sup>th</sup> issue. Contributions topped \$1000, and I began to believe, for the first time, that Katie might reach her goal. Elizabeth contacted WIXE 1190 AM in Monroe, NC, and told them about Katie's story on the front page of "The County Edge", and their scheduler asked to have Katie on their "Talk of the Town" news program with Shane Greene on the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup>.

That Wednesday was a golden day. Katie, in the fullness of her seven years and only some \$500 from her goal, was all smiles and confidence, and Mr. Greene and his boss, Mr. Morgan, were visibly impressed. The three of them talked for approximately ten minutes, and Katie spoke out clearly, mentioned her website several times, and was totally charming in the special way that only a very young girl can be. Mr. Greene could barely wait until the end of the interview to make a contribution, and there were others – like the anonymous gentleman who walked into our bank's Monroe branch, said only that he wanted to help Katie's Kids, and left \$100. That day went on to become the biggest

fundraising day of the project, as Katie brought in over \$700 and sailed past her goal with a full week left to go before Christmas.

We spent every spare minute during the week of the 15<sup>th</sup> leafing through sales flyers, checking store hours, and taking Katie to meet store managers. She told them about her kids, handed them a copy of “The County Edge” with her front-page feature, and then asked them for a discount on behalf of her kids. The response was excellent. The manager of a crafts and hobbies store promised her a 30% discount – even on goods that were already on sale. The manager of a department store walked to the service desk and returned with a \$50 gift card which he handed to Katie. And the manager of a restaurant where she intended to buy gift cards promised her ten complimentary meal cards having a value of approximately \$100. Everyone seemed to be happy to help.

The shopping itself began on Friday, the 19<sup>th</sup>, with a trip to the Apple Store. Earlier it had been Katie’s goal to buy one or two i-Pods, but when she walked into the store that afternoon, having raised over \$2600, it was her intention to buy eight. However, while she was making her purchase, the store manager, who had been deeply touched by Katie’s story, came out and gave her two additional ones free. We continued the shopping on Saturday with a trip to Michael’s where Katie bought eight buggies-full of art and craft supplies, books, and toys. Then from Michael’s we traveled to WalMart for gift cards and an armload of personal CD players, and on to Target for several dozen card and board games, which we loaded into an already packed Honda Odyssey during a thunderstorm. The final stop of the day was at Blockbuster for more gift cards, and then home – at bedtime, dog-tired, soaking wet, but feeling wonderful.

We spent most of Sunday sorting, labeling, and repacking well over **600** individual gifts into twenty-four cardboard shipping containers and three large Santa bags for delivery to the hospital the following day. Then, on the way to Levine, we made one final stop – at Chick-fil-A – for another fifty gift cards and a stack of those crazy calendars with the cows on them.

Our arrival at the hospital was something of a circus. Although we had warned Ms. Deana of the number of cartons we were bringing, we (and they) quickly found that hearing is one thing, but seeing can be something very different. There weren’t nearly enough buggies to hold everything, so much of our load was carted into the lobby in wheelchairs. And there were people everywhere – patients and staff coming and going and Ms. Deana and her people of course, but also one of the hospital’s community relations specialists, a reporter and a photographer from “The Charlotte Observer”, and eight or ten Child Life Specialists – all there to meet Katie. Everyone was asking questions, snapping pictures, opening boxes, shaking hands, and hugging Katie at the same time. The confusion bordered on chaos, but the joy overflowed – the joy of needs being met and dreams coming true. And Katie, in her red sweater and Santa cap, was magnificent. She’d worked and saved toward this moment for a full year, and she didn’t miss a second of it.

We wouldn’t be there on Christmas Morning, of course. Katie wouldn’t see the five year old boy with leukemia awaken to learn that Santa can even find you in the hospital. She would never know the seventeen year old girl with no hair who would find an i-Pod and an i-Tunes card by her bed. Those

treats were for others. Katie's reward was in simply knowing that she had done the best she could for her kids.

As for me, I thought the surprises were over when I finally sat down on Christmas Eve to rest for a moment and read the "Katie Claus" article in "The Charlotte Observer". I had no idea there were still several hundred more dollars to come in. And the biggest surprise of all – right there in black and white – something Katie had told Mr. Morrill that she hadn't told Elizabeth or me: "Next year we're going to do two hospitals."

### **KATIE'S KIDZ 2009 UPDATE**

On December 23, 2008, *The Charlotte Observer* published a feature on the front page of Section B entitled "Just Call Her Katie Claus" by a staff reporter named Jim Morrill who had been on hand the previous day to witness Katie's delivery of her load of presents to Levine Children's Hospital and to talk with her about her work. The story was picked up by the AP, and by the next day, newspaper readers all over North Carolina were reading about Katie. A surge of website activity followed along with a late flurry of donations that continued well into the new year. In fact, Katie was still receiving donations as late as mid-March of this year, and I suppose it's possible that there might yet be donations to come in as a result of the efforts of 2008.

But be that as it may, Katie is looking ahead. Early in the year she announced to Elizabeth and me that her fundraising goal for 2009 was \$8,000 – approximately three times the amount that she raised in 2008, and once again she began socking away any money that came her way against the time that she would again go shopping for Christmas presents for Katie's Kidz.

Then out of the blue, on February 2, we were contacted by a lady named Shannon Hitchcock, a freelance writer from Tampa, Florida, who specializes in true stories for and about children. While visiting relatives in North Carolina during the Christmas holidays, she'd read the article about Katie in *The Charlotte Observer*, and she wanted our permission to do an article of her own about Katie for possible publication in the "Gallant Kids" section of *Highlights for Children*, the well-known children's magazine that regularly makes its way into over two million homes and offices across the country. She explained that the magazine would require a signed release form from us and a couple of pictures of Katie that could be used in the article, but otherwise she seemed very confident that her proposed article would be well received. Well needless to say, we quickly supplied the release and the additional photos, but being one who has had some experience with the disappointments that often accompany attempts to write for money, I then promptly dismissed this effort as good idea that would likely come to nothing – a very long shot at best, like the proverbial "message in a bottle". Then a few weeks later, I entered Katie's story into the Kohl's Kids Who Care Scholarship Program, which provides scholarship money to youngsters who take part in activities that help people and/or improve a community. Even though I felt that Katie deserved to win, I considered this to be another of those well-intentioned long shots. I completed the on-line form, hit enter, and immediately forgot about it.

Besides, we had other issues to deal with – like how to triple our fundraising and if that actually happened, how to deal with the purchase and handling of \$8,000 worth of presents. Doing a third of that amount had kept us busy night and day for most of a month and had maxed out our storage and transport capability. We clearly would have to have help – “helper elves” as Katie referred to them. So, on April 7<sup>th</sup>, we held a meeting to formulate and organize our wants and needs with the hope that we might then be able to convert them into some sort of a plan of action. Our needs covered a wide range of areas. Under “Logistics” we needed purchasing assistance, storage space, manpower for sorting, labeling and packing gifts, and additional transportation capacity. Under “Promotional Materials” we needed a logo, business cards, T-shirts, posters, and so on. Under “Communication/Advertising” we needed a letter from Katie for an e-mail/direct mail campaign, significant updating of her website, and a Pay-Pal account among other things. Under the heading of “Fundraising Initiatives” we listed various possibilities other than simply asking for money – including selling Katie’s Kidz items on the internet through her website, holding raffles and distributing literature at gatherings such as craft shows and church functions, and offering a list of “services” to the community that Katie (with our help) would perform during her summer vacation. That list of services would include such things as feeding and watering pets during the owner’s absence, watering plants, collecting mail and newspapers, and doing drive-by security checks of homes.

During our meeting we also identified a need for more information from Levine, information about the presents themselves – which gifts worked particularly well and which ones didn’t, what groups or needs were being overlooked and how we could include them, and what about the kids who had actually received gifts. What did they say? How did they act? What was it like on Christmas morning? It was amazing how often we had been asked those sorts of questions by contributors, and we had only been able to respond by explaining that Katie did not actually distribute the presents. Clearly we needed a better answer than that. We needed some actual or anecdotal accounts of gift reception that we could share with contributors to give them a feel for the good that was being done and the happiness that was being generated through their donations. And finally, under the topic of “Future Growth of Katie’s Kidz” we recognized the need for official status as a “non-profit” organization and increased access to mass media, including TV.

Our list of needs went on and on, eventually covering about six pages, and even then we knew that it was only a partial list; however, we felt sure that we had identified most of the major areas and from those we were able to put together a list of several action items for immediate attention. Katie asked for an appointment with the senior pastor of our church, and on April 15, we met with Dr. Terry Moore to discuss our need for storage space and additional manpower to help with the gifts. He was visibly impressed with Katie’s commitment to her ministry and very supportive of her efforts. He agreed to arrange storage space for her during the days leading up to Christmas and he suggested possibly calling on the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts of the church for assistance as well as one or more of the children’s Sunday School classes. He also mentioned several contacts he had outside the church that would possibly be willing to help with fundraising and other activities.

We came away from our meeting with Dr. Moore feeling very encouraged and hopeful, and then on May 1, Katie had a booth at the Weddington UMC Spring Ladies Night Out – a combination dinner,

inspirational lecture, and craft show for the ladies of the community. She passed out flyers describing the vacation services she would be offering during the summer. She also held a raffle and accepted donations. Her booth was one of the most attractive and active ones in the entire show, and she had a great time telling dozens of people about her kids while bringing in almost a hundred dollars. That effort pushed her year-to-date total over \$1,000, and it seemed to confirm our idea that there was a place for her at gatherings of that type. We immediately set about to get Katie registered in other craft shows as well as to work on ideas for a logo and to plan the updating of the website. Christmas was still a long way off, but so was the \$8,000 mark. Nevertheless, we were moving and felt that we were making some progress in several key areas.

It is said that “miracles appear in the strangest of places”, and I believe that I was actually in the bathroom at the particular moment on May 6 when Elizabeth came running in to announce that she had just picked up a message from Shannon Hitchcock – that her article about Katie and her kids had been approved by the editors of *Highlights* and that it was being recommended for purchase. Elizabeth and Katie were jubilant, but I was stunned. Dumbfounded may be a better choice of words. In either case, it certainly appears that the most widely circulated children’s magazine in the country will be carrying an article about Katie’s Kidz in an issue to be published toward the end of this year. Then, about the time I was getting comfortable with the fact that Katie’s story will be in *Highlights*, on May 20, Katie received a letter from Kohl’s Department Stores informing her that her story had won at the store level and was being considered at the regional level. The potential publicity from these two events is a boost that we could previously have only dreamed about, but it suddenly has placed on our shoulders the responsibility of quickly positioning Katie’s Kidz in the best possible place to take advantage of the lift when it comes.

#### **CHRISTMAS 2009 UPDATE**

Speaking of lifts, we actually got several, although not from the places listed above. Katie’s story didn’t win at the regional level. The winner had been involved in her project for several years, and thus was able to reach more people than Katie in just her second year. Who knows, we may try that competition again a bit later on. And the *Highlights* article, that we were so looking forward to, couldn’t be scheduled in 2009 and had to be put off until 2010. Katie, however, took all of this in stride, as she and her helpers went on to raise over eleven thousand, six-hundred dollars (over 4 times the amount of 2008), making it possible for her to deliver presents to six area hospitals, rather than the three or four that had been earlier goals.

For the record, she took her information booth to four art and crafts shows, as well as to the BSA Troop 20 Annual Pancake Breakfast at Wesley Chapel Fire Department. She also gave a presentation and spent most of an afternoon with a third grade class at Long Creek Elementary School in Huntersville. In addition, she made presentations to four church groups, with the highlight coming at Matthews UMC where she spoke to a group of over two hundred teenagers who listened attentively to her 40 minute presentation, then gave her a standing ovation followed by a check for almost five hundred dollars.

In among these activities, Katie was interviewed numerous times by newspaper reporters resulting in articles in "The Enquirer-Journal" (Monroe), the "Independent Tribune" (Cabarrus County), the "Lake Norman Citizen" ( Mooresville), "The Daily Courier" (Forest City), "The Gaston Gazette" (Gastonia), and two outstanding articles by David Perlmutter in "The Charlotte Observer". In addition, there was a wonderful feature about Katie, with several pictures, in the January 2010 issue of the "Tega Cay Compass". You may find the text of these articles on this website under "In the News".

There's a good chance that you may have heard Katie on the radio. She was a guest on WIXE 1190 AM's Talk of the Town program (Monroe), WCAB 590 AM's Rutherford County Live with Jim Bishop (Rutherfordton), and at least twice on New Life 91.9 FM, our Charlotte area Christian radio station. Local TV coverage, which we'd only dreamed of before, came in the form of segments on News 14 Carolina, WSOC TV Channel 9, and WCNC TV News Channel 36. In addition, WLOS TV Channel 13 from Asheville did an incredibly warm and beautiful "person of the week" feature on Katie and her Kidz that aired on Christmas Eve and then again on Christmas Day.

Of course fundraising is only one part of the job. It takes more than a bit of shopping to buy over 2000 Christmas presents (or stated another way, to spend \$11,000) – especially when you're shopping sales, negotiating store discounts, and stopping continually to tell one customer or store employee after another exactly why you're purchasing 180 art sets or 7 dozen boxes of crayons, 15 i-Pods, 50 gift cards, 5 dozen decks of playing cards, or all the Monopoly games in the store. It took every minute we could find in a whole week, and we followed all that shopping up with a marathon labeling, sorting, and packing for the hospital day. Thank the Lord, we had help on that magic Saturday – about 20 elves came out to our makeshift North Pole toy shop in the Weddington UMC Fellowship Hall. Heck, I didn't even know the names of half the people who showed up to work – they just heard about what we were doing and decided to join in. Go figure. They ranged in age from around 7 to almost 70, and Santa himself never assembled a harder working or more beautiful group of helpers. And the thought that went through my mind again and again during that watershed event was that while no one in the room would receive even one of the hundreds of gifts they would touch that day, it would nevertheless be the highlight of their Christmas this year, and perhaps for years to come. With a smile on every face, Christmas carols playing in the background, and Katie running back and forth between tables and boxes checking on everything, it was as if we were being treated to a little glimpse of Heaven, where also, they say we'll be led by a child.

Sunday passed in the blink of an eye, and on Monday morning, Dec. 21<sup>st</sup>., we delivered a packed van-load of presents to Mission Children's Hospital in Asheville, where there was 8 to 10 inches of snow still on the ground. Then Tuesday morning, with the temperature far below freezing, we delivered a double van load of gifts to Hemby Children's Hospital at the Presbyterian complex in Charlotte. Tuesday afternoon it was a pick-up truck and a van load to Katie's "home hospital", Levine, where she was greeted by camera crews from three Charlotte TV stations as well as the Carolinas Medical Center's own video team, who by the way, put together an absolutely first rate Katie's Kidz piece that is currently being played on their own internal TV network. On Wednesday we delivered to the Jeff Gordon Children's Hospital over in Concord, where Katie got to work with her first-ever, female Santa Claus, and to CMC Union, better known as the Monroe Hospital. And then, on the morning of Christmas Eve, on

our way to celebrate Christmas with my family in Rutherford County, we stopped by and left several cartons of gifts at Cleveland Regional Hospital in Shelby.

Each of the activities recounted above – craft shows, presentations at churches, shopping, packing, and delivering presents – involved meeting people, sometimes dozens of people, and you can't share a story with that many people without hearing some of theirs. And we did hear them – lots of them, ranging from the heart-breaking to the up-lifting. We heard of a mother who dropped everything and raced to the hospital to which her injured teenage son had been airlifted. His condition was critical, and she stayed by his bed day and night. And for three days, she didn't even have the use of a comb or toothbrush. The hospital, you see, had no room in the budget for complimentary personal hygiene items. Then there was the mother we met with the beautiful little Down's Syndrome baby girl who, on the day of the baby's open heart surgery – literally as the infant was being wheeled into the operating room – received a phone call advising that her employment had been terminated and that she no longer had medical insurance coverage. But, thank Goodness, the stories weren't all tearjerkers.

For instance, we learned about a little blind fellow, 21 months old, and how he had spent 15 of his 21 months in the hospital, and of how his child life specialist hunted through a box of presents from Katie's Kidz and found him an activity ball with various shaped appendages that each produce a different sound when squeezed – features of great importance to a child lacking sight. Well, he took to it immediately, and they say he loves it. And there was the story of a spunky eighth grader with Hodgkins lymphoma who was in the hospital for a stem cell transplant – an effort to rebuild his bone marrow which had been destroyed by chemo-therapy. During a two week period, part of which he was too sick to get out of bed, and often in severe back pain, he walked a marathon – 26.2 miles in the hospital – with his IV pole beside him every step of the way. Along with some gift cards, he received a football and a basketball from Katie's Kidz, and it is my prayer that he wears both of them out.

There were other stories – like a third grade class that raised almost \$300 for Katie's Kidz, and another eight year old kid who heard Katie's story and began his own ministry – to provide Christmas gifts for children in foster care, and this totally charming nine year old girl who was so inspired by Katie's story that she began a drive to collect personal toiletry products for people who suddenly find themselves "living" at a hospital with sick loved ones. Yes indeed, we heard lots of stories. Perhaps the best one of all was about a young US soldier in Iraq who came across Katie's fan page on Facebook and had his Mom back home to send in a hundred dollar donation from his savings account. Or then again, maybe the best was the one about a middle-aged school teacher who happened to read a newspaper article about an eight year old girl named Katie who received and then responded to a call to help sick children; of how that teacher was so moved by the article that she chose to revisit her own call to help kids, from many years ago – a call she had never answered but had never been able to put completely out of her mind; and of how she is now in the process of converting her family's farm, which she inherited, into a Christian summer camp.

Well, so much for Christmas 2009. Now, you may be wondering where we go from here. Will she do it again in 2010? When does the fund-raising start? What's her new goal? Well, the word from Katie is an unflinching YES! As for when the new season of fund-raising will start, Katie's season is even longer than

NASCAR's. Last Sunday (January 9th), she made presentations before two groups at Huntersville Presbyterian Church, including the combined adult Sunday School classes – approximately 200 strong – to kick off the 2010 campaign. And she is already scheduled to speak during the next few weeks to a Rotary Club, two United Methodist Women's circles and another church. When Elizabeth asked Katie if she had set a goal for 2010 yet, she answered in typical Katie fashion, "No; not yet. Jesus and I are still discussing it." But then, just a couple of days ago, she stopped by my chair and announced, with truckloads of blessed assurance, "Daddy, I'm going to Chapel Hill and Duke this year." Even as bright as she is, 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.

Dean Greene (January 14, 2010)