

A lesson in love — and living

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March 23, 2010 12:00 AM



WAREHAM — A special child, an incredible charity and a poignant book all have two very important things in common:

The ability to enrich lives while building a stronger community in the process.

"She taught me so many life lessons, and this is one of them," said author Gretchan Pyne, whose newest book, "Lulu's Lovely Dress That's Too Small!" debuted March 20.

"This book is about the true kindness and generosity of a child."

Pyne's inspiration comes from her own daughter, Olivia "Lulu" Pyne, who died while vacationing on Cape Cod eight years ago. Lulu was just four years old when, after a fun-filled day at the beach with her family, she leaned against an unsecured bicycle rack in a parking lot; it toppled over, killing her instantly.

The terrible accident would have left many mothers embittered. But Pyne has searched to find deeper meaning.

Brief as it was, "I believe that Lulu's life had a purpose," said Pyne.

"I believe that a single moment can alter the course of a person's life and ultimately change who they become. It is in such a moment that a person has a rare and unique opportunity to live fearlessly and give," said Pyne, a Wareham resident.

And give she does through the Olivia "Lulu" Pyne Foundation of Hope where the proceeds from the sales of her books, which include "Lulu's Rose Colored Glasses" and "Lulu Decorates Daddy" go to support scholarships and children's charities.

"At first it was about my grieving and not wanting to ever forget a single moment and it's grown into so much more," said Pyne.

"My daughter brought me to this special place. This is such an amazing way for me to share the joy and magic of Lulu."

"Lulu's Lovely Dress That's Too Small!," a story about a young girl who has outgrown her "most favorist dress," yet isn't sure she's ready to let it go, formed an immediate bond with GiftsToGive, an entirely volunteer run local charity that repurposes clothing, toys and other items for children in need.

"The only word to describe it is serendipitous," said Pyne of her connection to GiftsToGive.

Pyne was first introduced to the charity and its founder, Jim Stevens, through Martha Kay, principal of the Gomes Elementary School in New Bedford. Pyne is an avid volunteer at the school.

"She told me that she had someone I absolutely had to meet and it grew from there."

Tucked away in a sprawling mill in the South End of New Bedford, GiftsToGive is a magnet for community-minded volunteers of all ages and backgrounds.

"I always tell people that if you have time and you're not spending it here then you're crazy," mused GiftsToGive volunteer Paula Ritchotte, a retired nurse who spends countless hours a week connecting local children with necessities that their families are unable to afford.

"I don't even think of it as volunteering anymore. I get so much more in return."

GiftsToGive relies on contributions of gently used clothing, books, and toys that are then systematically cleaned, sorted and redistributed to local children. New socks and underwear are always in demand. While no one who works at GiftsToGive is paid, they certainly take home a paycheck of sorts nonetheless.

"Partnerships are the key to everything and this place is one big partnership," said Stevens noting that there are more than 2,000 homeless children living in SouthCoast.

Another 30,000 spend their days struggling with poverty, he said.

"It's hard to define who gains more in the process — the children who receive the contributions or the ones who come here and volunteer," Stevens said.

In Pyne's latest literary creation, Lulu ends up giving her lovely dress away so that another child can enjoy it.

"That's the lesson. A gift of love is never too small," said Pyne.

"Everyone leaves here with a gift," said Pyne of GiftsToGive.

In an effort to support GiftsToGive, Pyne will host clothing drives at her upcoming book signings for "Lulu's Lovely Dress." They include Saturday, March 27 from 1 to 3 p.m. at Old Company Store in Wareham and on Saturday, April 10 from 10 a.m. to noon at Kaleidoscope of Dance & Gymnastics in Wareham.

"No matter what life brings, I believe you can become a victim or you can reach out and give to others," said Pyne.

"It is in giving that I have found grace and its there that I feel Lulu most."

Visit www.lulubellebooks.com or www.giftstogive.org for more information.

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