

A MIGHTY Heart

Talk about generosity of spirit. With boundless energy and a can-do attitude, **PAM KONER** has dedicated her life to providing food, friendship and hope to needy families across the country. BY DIANE MEHTA



"Our charity isn't about just giving but also creating a community," says Pam, with daughter Chloe.

The room that serves as Pam Koner's home office is a merry mess. Dozens of presents—puzzles and blocks, dolls and toy jewelry, books and board games—are piled from floor to ceiling and everywhere in between. "We had a drive at the elementary school, and parents have been dropping off stuff left and right," Pam says, rooting around her desk in search of the phone. Come mid-December, she and a crew of student volunteers will pack up the presents, along with shiny gift bags and bright ribbons and bows, and send them to disadvantaged families in rural Illinois, Arizona and Louisiana. "Parents will be able to pick out the ones they want, wrap them and put them under the tree so they can experience the joy of giving," says Pam. "We all know what it's like to wake up on Christmas morning and wait for the magic to start. It's a tremendous feeling to help make that happen."

But Pam doesn't stop spreading comfort and joy when the holidays are over. The toy drive is just one small part of her main charity, Family-to-Family, which is also run from the 58-year-old's home in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York. The hunger-relief program links those in need with good Samaritans who buy them a week's worth of groceries at the end of every month, when food banks and pantries are often empty and children are most likely to go hungry. Since its founding seven years ago, F-to-F has provided nearly a



"Empathy is part of their everyday lives," Pam says of daughters Olivia (center) and Chloe.

Compassion Central

Providing food for a family is just one of several programs Pam Koner has set up to help the needy. Below, some other ways you and your kids can reach out through Family-to-Family.

* **Victory Garden** Pam's newest charity is a gift that keeps on giving. Buy a starter kit that includes 10 hens and feed, as well as seeds, a rake, hose and hoe so that impoverished rural families can produce their own eggs and grow vegetables. "Master gardeners" help them get started, and once a family learns the basics they can mentor others.

* **Birthday Buddies** Pick a community, and the age and gender of the child you want to surprise. Then fill a shoebox with cake mix, frosting, candles, decorations, \$5 or \$10 spending money and a goody bag, and mail it out.

* **Books for Life** Donate your used books, collect them from neighbors or hold a drive at your school so that they then can be sent to a lending library at one of F-to-F's outreach centers.

* **Traveling Journals** F-to-F links your child's classroom to one in a sponsored rural community so that students can get to know one another by writing and drawing in a shared journal that is mailed back and forth between schools.

* **Save the Crocs** Hold a drive in your town to collect gently used Crocs, and F-to-F will locate a school within 50 miles where you can donate them. —*Krista Meyerhoff*

million meals to 17 communities in 15 states, from Appalachia to the Navajo Nation in Arizona. The care packages contain much more than canned soup and mac and cheese. "We match families who have kids around the same age and ask donors and recipients to write each other, send pictures and share their lives," Pam explains. "That creates a deep connection, a lasting bond. We're all just good neighbors—living many miles apart."

Pam launched her nonprofit in 2002 after reading a newspaper series about poverty. "The first piece focused on Pembroke, Illinois, where people lived in houses with dirt floors and tires on the roofs to keep them from blowing away," she says. A former fashion stylist and mom of two who had divorced in 2000, Pam was moved to tears. "This was an hour outside Chicago, but it was like a Third World country," she says. Daughter Olivia, then 16, remembers her mom stomping out onto the porch, thrusting the paper at her and saying, "You have to read this! We're going to do

something about it as a family!” Pam got on the phone and called the pastor at Pembroke’s Church of the Cross, asking what was needed. His answer was heart-breakingly simple—food. Pam quickly rounded up six families in Hastings-on-Hudson who were eager to step up; within three months, 30 more had signed on. There are now some 400 sponsor families in 29 states. More than half have been with F-to-F since its inception, many sponsoring the same family for years. “It’s hard to quit on people when you know them,” says Pam. “That’s why our donors don’t disappear. Just the opposite—they make sacrifices so they can keep giving.”

They also learn key life lessons along the way. “When a parent shows kindness to others, it affects the way they live and inspires their kids to do the same,” says Pam. “And by exchanging letters, donor families get a real sense of how different life is for the poor, which changes how they look at the world.” That certainly happened to Pam’s daughters as they got to know their sponsored family in Pem-

broke, Walter and Lily Davis and their five children. “When I first wrote their daughter it was hard getting my ideas out,” says Pam’s younger child, Chloe, then 11. “She was my age, but she was a stranger after all. So I just drew pictures, asked about school and what games she liked.” Still, Chloe instinctively knew she had much to give. As the Koners packed their first box of food, she ran to her room, rifled through her closet and returned with a bagful of

Chloe’s jacket.” Chloe was touched by the story—and the family’s hardship. “I have so many coats, I wished I had given her another one,” she says. “It taught me not to take things for granted.” Olivia, too, was moved. “I realized each month’s donation was as important as the first, and that our connection meant so much to both our families,” she says. “It made me want to do more.” Both girls have inherited their mother’s generous spirit. Olivia, a senior at Purchase College, in Westchester, New

Donors do more than give food to needy families. They write letters, send photos and share life stories.

clothes, including her L.L. Bean jacket.

Two years later, when Pam visited Pembroke and met the Davises, “Lily and I ran into each other’s arms and cried,” she recalls. “I could see our microwave and vacuum, and their daughter was wearing

York, spent the summer as an F-to-F intern, and Chloe, who graduated high school in June, is taking a gap year working with special needs children in Costa Rica. “I’m proud to say empathy has become part of their everyday lives,” says Pam.

Thanks to Pam's energy, F-to-F keeps on growing. In addition to support from scores of volunteers, the group receives \$250,000 in donated food and services each year. The economic downturn has led Pam to extend her reach to new communities in Michigan and Indiana, as well as Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, New York, F-to-F's first urban neighborhood. And with layoffs hitting her hometown, she recently began providing for a dozen local families who had nowhere else to turn. "Because we all live close together, their food boxes are labeled with letters instead of names, so people won't see who's down on their luck," she says. Pam knows there will always be others who find themselves struggling, and more who want to give, and she's determined to keep building bridges between them. "In the end we are all family, and we need to be there for one another," she says. "We're meant to be connected." ●

Giving Inside the Box

Want to be a part of the F-to-F community?

* **Join an existing group.** Go to family-to-family.org and click on Donating Chapters to see if there's one near you. E-mail the chairperson listed, who will match your family to one in the group's sponsored community. Every month volunteers pack a week's worth of nonperishable dinner foods and a nonfood item like winter gloves or toiletries, as well as a personal letter, then deliver it to the chapter chair for shipping. Writing is key—it creates an intimate bond, inspires hope and teaches your kids empathy and caring. Or send your letter with a monthly \$35 check, which F-to-F will use to buy groceries for your sponsored family at a local store.

* **Donate online.** On the website click Cyber-Sponsor a Family and select the community you'd like to help. Sign up with a credit or debit card, and you'll be matched with a family. Your monthly donation of \$31.21 (you commit for 12 months) will be used to provide seven dinner-type meals—including fresh fruits and vegetables—that will be delivered to an outreach center for the family to pick up. Send letters through snail mail or e-mail the family at the outreach center, where they can write you back.

* **Make a one-time gift.** Can't commit long term? Donate what you can by sending a check to Family-to-Family, PO Box 255, Hastings-on-Hudson, NY 10706. Every dollar counts. —*Krista Meyerhoff*