

Random acts of kindness

By Ruth Ostrow

I MET Kelly Hubbard at a motivational seminar. We were sitting next to each other, day after day. Because she was a very beautiful woman with silky, black hair and Slavic features, I had made up a number of stories about who she was in the corporate world and what her life must be like.

However, though she was very elegantly dressed, I did notice that she wore the same pants and jacket every day.

During one sharing session, I joked that we were both a bit unimaginative with our daily wardrobe. "Oh, I gave all my clothes away," she said simply. "I have nothing but this suit left."

I was intrigued to hear this, again making up stories as to why this might be the case. A weight loss, or gain, a boyfriend who didn't like her style. But over lunch a story unfolded that really jolted me.

Kelly, 29, told me she worked as nurse in Newcastle, NSW. She and her businessman husband Craig, 34, who was beside her at the seminar, had just returned from Africa, where they were working as volunteers with the Salvation Army.

They were stationed at the Masiye orphan camp in the Matopos National Park in Zimbabwe, working with children whose parents had died of AIDS. "Travelling around, I was shocked by what I saw. People were so desperate and hungry, I found myself opening my suitcase and throwing clothes out to the poor. I didn't know what else to give," says Kelly, describing the sight of billowing designer dresses flapping in the dry African wind.

Craig adds: "I literally ended up taking shirts off my back and handing them to people. There is no health system or unemployment system to help families without money. They just die."

Before I asked the Hubbards why they went, I wanted to know if such gestures really made a difference. It's the sort of question that plagues us all as we watch the World Vision or Christmas Appeal number flash up on the TV screen.

Craig told me a lovely story: "I gave one guy \$4 Australian, which is the equivalent of \$100 in Zimbabwe. You'd have to work forever to save that. He needed the money to get the fanbelt on his car fixed so he and his wife could get to work each day.

"When I handed him the price of a cappuccino, he looked at me like he had won lotto. Tears were welling up in his eyes. He was dumbstruck. It was an act of kindness that he couldn't even respond to. Because of that tiny act, he and his wife will now be able to earn money to feed their five children. Because of that tiny act, lives will possibly be saved."

Kelly talked of another small gesture: "I handed some guys baseball caps that I'd been carrying around. You can't imagine the expression on their faces. These guys worked outside in the burning heat all day. No one had ever given them hats to shelter them from the gruelling sun. They were amazed that anyone could

be so generous.

"I thought just how lucky we are and how many things we take for granted." Craig says: "Anything is better than nothing. When you go to a school of 900 kids and see the look on their faces when you donate a soccer ball or boomerang, you can't put a price on that.

"Small deeds may not save anyone's life, but every small act is a huge thing to someone in need. And if everyone gave something little, it all adds up to something big."

He says the most important thing for him has been his reappraisal of his own life. "If you don't go and see how other people live, you don't appreciate what you have. It has made me kiss the ground and thank the Lord every day we've been back, because we have such a good life."

Craig says he was motivated to do missionary work after he lost his 52-year-old mother to lung cancer three years ago. "It was a terrible death and it made me realise life is very short and you need to fulfil your dreams."

Hers was one of charity, which she instilled in him. She used to say: "It's a test of faith to give to strangers."

After her death Craig wandered around for a long time looking for something to be involved in, so he could help the less fortunate. One night he and Kelly came upon a Salvos meeting with a group who were about to go to Africa on a mission.

Before setting off, the team inspired the people of Newcastle to contribute bags full of clothes, sheets and supplies to take to Zimbabwe. Craig says he's now committed to donating 10 per cent of profits from his software-development business to the Salvos each year. "You don't have to go to Africa to give. It's in the small things we do every day."

The postscript to this story is that Craig and Kelly were at the motivational seminar to "build self-confidence". They confided to me that they had low self-esteem, which impeded their success. There are none so modest and humble as ordinary people involved in doing extraordinary acts of kindness.

From the heart

Dear Ruth,

Re your column on Rachael Falk (November 6), my wife and I live with the reality of our mortality every day. The scars on our bodies assure us of that. The memories of the friends and relatives and our cancer support members who have gone give the lie to Rachael's glib assertions. She says she has "learned there is richness in death" and feels "death can offer so much to the living". I doubt she can even see the irony. Someone dies so she can feel good about living? When you think about it, it's kind of parasitic.

Dennis Whelan,
Balwyn, Melbourne, Victoria

Dear Ruth,

My story is one of lost libido. I'm a young 60 and have lived a life of high sexual energy. My mother is in her 80s and is still going, so I'm devastated to lose it. I've no sensation in my nether regions, let alone lust. I've tried everything, including therapy, but did not get anywhere. HRT, progesterone creams, yoga -- nothing has restored that gorgeous rising of sexual heat. I have a stable partner

of 12 years and regret to say that the rot set in five years ago. I cannot even take a lover since I don't fancy other men! Can any of your readers offer some suggestions?

Name withheld on request

Dear Ruth,

Re your columns, perhaps people should stop being so introspective and open their eyes to the rest of the world. When the biggest fault you can find with your life is that of an absentee father, then you've led a pretty blessed life by world standard. I suggest a few readers need to go out on a cold, dark, windy night, look up at the stars and realise how insignificant and manageable their troubles really are.

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