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5-Year-Old Girl Feeds Nearly 18,000 Hungry San Franciscans; What Can You Do?

Little Phoebe, from San Francisco, California has a *big* heart. That's an understatement. Actually, her kindness and compassion is bigger than most grown ups I've crossed paths with while reporting TV news for nearly a decade.

It started off with a simple question by Phoebe, an adorable little girl with long brown locks, peach-colored cheeks and big doe eyes, like a character straight out of a Disney after-school special. After seeing a person holding a cardboard sign begging for food, Phoebe wondered, "Why does that man look so sad, and why is he holding a sign in the street?"

That question to her parents, during her daily ride to daycare, sparked an idea that has helped feed nearly 18,000 hungry San Franciscans.

A grown up conversation ensued. "What can we do to help?" asked Phoebe. Her parents told her about one possible place the hungry could go for help; The food bank.

Phoebe also asked Kathleen Albert, her teacher at "With Care Day Care," about the hunger problem. Albert explained that some people fall on hard times and don't have the basics like food and clothes. Phoebe replied, "I want to raise money for the San Francisco Food Bank to feed hungry people then," she said. Her ambitious goal was to raise \$1,000, in two months. Why \$1,000? No one knows; Phoebe couldn't even count denominations of money before the project.

"Phoebe focused on the smaller picture, and what she could do," her teacher explained. She decided to collect cans as a project to complete her mission. Phoebe knew that she could raise money by recycling cans, because her dad would bring her and her sister to trade cans for cash on the weekends.

Albert, a spunky, grey-haired woman, with big Coke-bottle round, purple rimmed glasses, who resembles a jovial, energetic, Sunday strip comic book caricature, admits, "Although, I immediately supported Phoebe's lofty goal, I thought, 'Caaaaans?' I didn't

think a 5-year-old could possibly raise that much money in just two months time." And as adults sometimes are...She was wrong.

With a little bit of guidance from Albert and a whole lot of support from classmates, Phoebe wrote letters to 150 family, friends, alumni and neighbors. She received 50 responses. Word got around about the 5-year-old girl who wrote, "Dear Family and Friends... My charity project is to raise lots of money for the S.F. Food Bank. They need money. I am collecting soda cans. Would you please give me your soda cans and bring them to With Care... "Donations started pouring in... Friends, family and even anonymous donors dropped off cans, checks and cash at the colorful storybook-looking Victorian in a San Francisco neighborhood which houses Phoebe's day care. Phoebe's project, which had started with small donations of \$5, \$10, then \$20 bills, grew exponentially. As, word spread, people started matching donations dollar for dollar. "I was getting cash in the mail, and I thought this is great, I'm getting money in my mailbox," Albert recalls. Albert's loud, one-two-three eyes-on-me classroom voice softens as she admits, "Does she understand it [the hunger problem] like you and I, no, but she understood something needed to be done. I learned something from her. And when you learn something from children, it's great!"

Phoebe responded personally to every donation, no matter how large or small. She would skip recess, instead counting money and writing thank-you notes to all who gave. "Little Phoebe was determined and never once complained," says Albert, "They looked at it as, 'it doesn't have to be big.' We talked about it in terms of Barack Obama...and how it was the little money and the little donations. So when people came to the door with one or two cans, people we didn't even know, she would say, oh, that's five cents, that's ten cents, that's fifteen cents. She understood, that you start off small, and you can make it bigger, bigger, bigger."

Fast forward two months.

Last June, all of the students at With Care, got dressed to the nines for a big celebration, complete with a ceiling full of colorful balloons, decorations and cake. Phoebe handed over the money and checks she collected in a handmade and hand-colored pencil box with flowers and stickers and colorful stars, to Paul Ash, the Executive Director of the San Francisco Food Bank. Phoebe's grand total: \$3,736.30. How many hungry people will that amount feed? Just ask Phoebe, she'll tell you "Seventeen-thousand something." The exact amount, according to Ash, 17,800 hungry people will be fed, thanks to Phoebe's kindness, compassion and determination.

I heard about this story from Gayle Keck, San Francisco Food Bank media relations spokesperson, whom I met while on an assignment, reporting and field-producing for PBS's *California Heartland*, a statewide magazine show that focuses on the California's agriculture and how it affects Californians. Keck and I connected over stories surrounding the spirit of giving and volunteerism. I asked her to keep an eye out for a project I created after getting laid off of my full-time TV reporting job last December, 'Go Inspire Go' featuring inspiring stories through videos shared on YouTube, while

using social media to create social change. So I was thrilled when Keck told me about this amazing little girl, who at that time had raised just over her goal of \$1,000.

I thought, great, she raised more than what she had anticipated, so I was shocked, proud and inspired when I heard she raised nearly \$4,000! Some people I shared this story with cried. Others told me they're moved to look within themselves to think about what they can do to better someone else's life or their community. While Phoebe does not fully comprehend the complicated problems of world hunger, she did know that seeing hungry people made her sad. So she did what she could, and the rest, well.... Oprah, are you listening?

Little Phoebe didn't just inspire the people whom she literally looks up to, she also inspires her fellow little eye-level friends, who also broke open their piggy banks and shared their allowance money to support their phenomenal little playmate.

I too, learned from Phoebe's story, I learned that you never can be too young or too old to make a difference. But if you're too apathetic or scared, no matter what age, you'll never create change or improve your life or the life of others.

The simple question I pose to you is, if a 5-year-old girl can feed thousands, WHAT CAN YOU DO? "Anything is possible" is a cliché. Except when it isn't.

Here are some suggestions to help the hungry:

- 1.) Research non-profits in and around your area. Food Banks and Food Pantries are a good start. Then make a donation: As Phoebe shows us, no amount is too small. Or donate canned food.
- 2.) Time is money, and sometimes, it's the intention that is worth its weight in gold. Volunteer at a non-profit that helps feed the hungry in your community or create your own. I've learned that you can make volunteering fun. How? Get your friends involved and bring them along, I'm sure the extra helping hands will be welcomed. Also think about your hobbies or skills you have that you can share with other organizations or service oriented groups.
- 3.) Think about your skills or resources around you and do as Phoebe did... and just ask! Start a project of your own, then ask for help, donations and volunteers.

That's what I did, I have ten years of TV reporting, producing, videography, editing and writing experience. Like many Americans, I too am deeply affected by the down economy. After being laid off from my day job as a TV reporter for a news station in San Francisco. I knew long before I met Phoebe that too often people like her and stories their stories are lost in the crush of bad news and celebrity misconduct that seems to dominate the modern news cycle. A chance conversation with a friend led to an idea, and one idea led to several others, and now, I am running a fledgling project and soon-to-be non-profit: www.GoInspireGo.com. This is the hub that connects viewers and readers to my

YouTube Channel (Where we create inspiring videos with suggestions or links at the end of every story where people could go to help the person/people featured in the video.)

GO INSPIRE GO'S Goals:

The Mission: To set up a global platform for people to see and share inspirational stories.

(There's a link at the end of every story where people could go to help the person/people featured in the video)

The Vision: My hope is that everybody will be inspired to use their resources and talents to see what they can do to better someone's life or better their community.

I launched this website in March of 2009, with the thought that if I could just help one or two people through my expertise and skill set, then my mission would be accomplished. I didn't expect such a huge show of support around the world. I surely wasn't ready for the influx of e-mails, messages, comments and calls to come in: Viewers continue to connect with us from around the world (including: North and South America, Europe and Africa) to tell us they're doing to better someone else's life or improve their community. The people in the stories weren't the only ones who were greatly affected by the volunteers, I realized that volunteers who stepped also saw life through a completely different lens. It is truly amazing to see a huge shift in perspective in all of my volunteers, many of whom lost their jobs and were so depressed, they would sit in the dark in their pajamas all day. Wow.

Inspiration in Action:

You can find out more about Toan Lam at <http://www.goinspirego.com>. Click on the YouTube link and check out the stories his team created, and videos created by viewers. Contact Toan at: toanlam@goinspirego.com