

## Generosity a Naples family's tradition

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Noreen Rambacher doesn't mind talking about the liver cancer that could some day take her life.

She just doesn't focus on it.

There's too much to do.

"I'm going to live until I die," she says, "and I don't know when that's going to be."

Living means battling the fourth-stage cancer with monthly and sometimes weekly experimental treatments in Philadelphia for Noreen, who retired to Naples with husband, Henry, 18 years ago.

It also means wringing the most of every other moment for the work she does with her daughter, Penny Rambacher, and the group Penny founded, Miracles in Action.

Penny says Noreen is one of the miracles and proof that generosity is good medicine.

Her cancer was diagnosed in the days after the 9/11 attacks. She wasn't supposed to survive beyond three months.

But Noreen was busy helping Penny.

She was busy helping to gather school supplies, hygiene kits, newborn kits, clothing, shoes and tools, wheelchairs, blankets and toys for the children of urban ghettos and remote villages of Central and South America. She was busy sewing school backpacks to deliver to them.

Noreen's biggest gift to them came in January when the school she built for the village of San Antonio el Cornejo opened its doors in Guatemala.

But that's a jump-start to a story that really begins a generation back with Noreen's mother and Penny's grandmother, Hannah Mae Cooper.

Hannah Mae, who lived in Hamilton, Ontario, and died Dec. 14, 2002, wasn't around to see what her daughter did with the money she left her.

Noreen and Penny know she would approve.

Hannah Mae's own miracle, her son, Peter, who was the first child to survive after eight miscarriages, is the one who invested her money so there was something of an estate to leave to her children.

At 71, Noreen could think of nothing her share would buy that she wanted or needed. She knew about real need from working with Penny.

"We aren't put here to be self-centered people," Noreen says, "and part of the miracle was that my mother left me the money not when I was 40 or 50 or 60, not at a time when I needed it."

#### AT A GLANCE

**Three generations of giving:** To make a donation to or for more information about Miracles in Action, call (239) 348-0815 or (239) 455-0815

So the village of San Antonio el Cornejo got its school.

Escuela de Milagros, the School of Miracles, an airy but solidly built structure with three huge classrooms, a teachers' room and a kitchen, opened its doors early this year.

Now, the village's 120 school-age children have more space and more teachers.

Hannah Mae would be happy about that, Penny said.

"Oma," as she calls her, knew the importance of literacy.

"She taught my grandfather to read and write when they first got married," Penny said.

Her grandfather, Alex Cooper, was 9 when his father died, and he left school to support his family, never learning to read or write.

Hannah Mae spent later years volunteering as a reading tutor for Canada's Literacy Council.

Noreen and Penny take their cues on generosity from Hannah Mae.

Penny, of Naples, an American Airlines flight attendant, had worked with the charity delivery group Airline Ambassadors for years when she decided she could do more sustainable projects and founded Miracles in Action.

The group is innovative about rounding up supplies and does a lot with a little.

Penny is shameless about asking for help for her kids from anyone with something to offer, whether that something is school supplies or hotel towels or cash.

She will speak to any group that will have her. She will tell them how they can help.

Penny says that while she may be the only one of the three generations without children by blood, she has many in spirit who live in those slums and remote villages.

"These are my kids," she says.

Through Miracles in Action, she's delivered school supplies, sewing machines, blankets, clothing and toys to some of the world's poorest people.

She's offered disabled people in poverty undreamed of mobility by rounding up and delivering hundreds of wheelchairs to them.

She's met many of the basic needs of the 400 families who work, eat and sleep in Quito, Ecuador's garbage dump.

She's found sponsors for villages that were a pump and pipeline away from clean water to reach that goal.

On May 22, Penny and Noreen, if her health allows, are off on another Miracles in Action mission that would make Hannah Mae happy.

They're returning to San Antonio Cornejo to buy and deliver 50 wood stoves for families who must now cook on open fires.

Neither woman feels sorry for the people they help through Miracles in Action. On the contrary, they say they've learned from them how to be grateful for what they have and be generous with it as well.

Their hope is that others will learn those lessons, too, even if it means simply doing small things closer to home for people they know.

They say people caught up in the complaints and confusion of modern life could learn from those for whom joy is born with the gift of a blanket or a ball.

Penny says she appreciates the miracles that seem to show up every day for her kids, but she most appreciates the miracle of her mother being alive to see the school built.

She only falters when she thinks her mother might lose the battle with cancer, and she confesses those fears to Noreen.

"Don't worry," Noreen tells Penny, patting the top of her daughter's back. "I'm going to be right here."

Penny says it's the same place from which Hannah Mae watches them now.



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