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## The Write Place At the Write Time: Pay It Forward Initiative

First inspired by an anonymous Facebook post in February, we developed our own version of a Pay It Forward initiative to spread the love in 2014 that coincides with our magazine's community-oriented, humanitarian approach. The purpose of this initiative was to inspire us all to remember to go out of our way to brighten someone's life, make things easier for a loved one or a stranger, renew faith in kindness and let that warmth spread.

We asked to receive stories of kind gestures (whether in the traditional 'pay it forward' fashion where the receiver is then invited to participate or whether it was one gesture from one person to another) and offered that the first five people who contacted us about this with 'Pay It Forward' in the subject line would receive something from us in turn (be it a book, gift certificate, free creative writing consult/coaching, etc...).

Check out our featured stories below and let this be only a spark. Find your way of paying it forward. How will you make *your* difference?

"When I was living in Monroe, Louisiana a lifetime ago, I was driving down the street and it was pouring rain. I saw a young woman with a small child waiting at the bus stop. They were getting drenched. I pulled over and handed them my Christian Dior umbrella (got it with a perfume promotion) and said, 'Here, take this.' The woman was hesitant, but then smiled and said, 'Thank you so much.' I drove away with a warm heart and not concerned about a designer umbrella. It was just a name on polyester. But,

I've never forgotten her smile. I shall look for more opportunities now."—Sue Mayfield Geiger

"With everyone being pulled in far too many directions these days, many people tend to miss out on one of the greatest pleasures one can experience in this often difficult life which is helping out a fellow human being who is truly in need. I strongly believe that all of us (especially those who have been blessed with an abundant life) have a fundamental responsibility to help others. I've been pretty lucky in my life and as a way of 'paying it forward,' I'd like to share a story of mine in the hope that anyone reading this will feel motivated to go out and do something similar. Sometimes, just letting someone clearly in a hurry take your place in line or taking the trouble to hold the door for an elderly person can really make someone else's day.

My story takes place in the downtown section of the city I used to work in. It was a sunny but bitterly cold winter's day and I decided to go out for a quick walk as I often did when grabbing lunch. On this day, however, I came across a sight that troubled me deeply...an older woman in dirty, ragged clothes was standing in front of the local shopping arcade soliciting donations. She was saying that she had not eaten in two days. I was determined that she would have a good, hot meal that day. I approached her and respectfully told her that I wanted to help and asked her to come with me. I walked with her into the shopping arcade and went to a small restaurant that I frequented where I knew the owner. 'Steve, this woman would like something to eat...please give her whatever she wants and I'll take care of it.' I wanted to make sure that she got what she needed, which was very simply just a good meal on a cold day.

She thanked me with a nod of her head and a smile and we went our separate ways. I went back to my office to finish my workday feeling like I'd made some small difference. I never saw that woman again but I hope she enjoyed her meal that day and maybe even got back on her feet at some point and went on to help someone else in a similar situation. For those of you reading this, I encourage you to be open to the opportunities that cross your path every day to help other people, especially those clearly in need. I promise you, you'll invariably get back hundred times more than you give and you never know the downstream impacts your gesture could have."—Clark Gregory

"The concept of paying it forward has exploded over the past decade with amazing results. There is an endless list of ways to pay it forward.

We can teach someone a skill that will last a lifetime. We can help someone during illness or tragedy. Listen to someone who needs a friend. Share life experiences to help others struggling with the same challenges. It costs nothing to give someone a few hours of your time but can mean everything to the person who feels lost and alone.

Finding someone to help isn't difficult. People leave comments on social media sites, game room chat boards, and forums. I read between the lines to their inner pain. An abusive childhood, a bipolar diagnosis, and a psychiatric hospital stay are just three of the life experiences that taught me compassion and patience. Those traits show in my interactions with others, even through the internet. Although I'm not a professional, people trust my judgment.

A young man was at risk of bleeding to death after he cut his wrist with a rusty blade while we talked online. Hinting at what he did gave me enough time to get help. He trusted me, talked to me. He lived, went on to do good things with his life.

A young woman was ready to walk away from her husband and four children for a man she had never met in person. She stayed with her family. Although she struggles with her bipolar, she's happy.

A retiree with an abusive wife who made his days a nightmare hated his life. Frequent trips to the ER, police calls, and court dates filled his life. He now lives his days in peace and joy.

Others I talked to for shorter times and impacted their lives in small ways. Conversations that began in the darkness and ended with a brightly shining light leading them toward the path of healing. Sharing stories from my life, giving examples of how I moved forward, convinces each one of them to seek professional help. They admitted their faults and flaws as they walked the path to healing.

Every single one of these people affected me in some way. Maybe they aren't aware of it even. But I'm honored they allowed me into their lives, that they trusted me enough to guide them during times of stress. I'm

humbled to have had the chance to impact so many individual lives."—JaeLynn Topper

"I, along with my wife, Elaine, am a hospice bereavement volunteer. I was inspired by a client whose late-father wanted to leave a small footprint. She said he wanted his life to be like walking on the sand. So, I gave her a sand dollar and wrote this poem for her."—Neal Whitman

### **Shifting Sands**

Let go of destinations.  
Follow a compass, not a map.  
Hang out with a nomad.  
Don't stop at false borders.  
Stop at every oasis.  
Lower your gaze.  
The evening brings relief.  
Step away from the campfire with care.  
Love the sand wherever it is.

"Through my work published here, I was able to reconnect with a friend from college. One of the Austin Neighborhood fans told her about my stories, and she reached out to me via Facebook. We grew up in adjacent neighborhoods and the West Side stories remind her of happy days. We reminisce about the fun we had in college. As she is undergoing treatment for breast cancer at this time, I check in with her daily to see how she is doing. I have had the opportunity to surprise her on several occasions.

First, I sent her copies of my stories. Then when she told me she'd been caught in the rain coming home from her treatment and that she'd lost her umbrella, I contacted the Denver Art Museum and shipped her a Degas "art" umbrella. Another idea came about during one of our discussions about college days. I found the digital archives for the yearbooks. I sent her the link but then decided to contact the Marquette library and have the yearbooks shipped to her. Small ways to pay it forward for her friendship as well as her appreciation and support of my stories."—Anita Solick Oswald

Additional responses/participants: C. Michelle Olson, Chery Sommese, LeeAnne Oschmanns

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