



STEPHEN SAL PUKAS

Generosity Lessons

Teaching children social responsibility

By Joriel Foltz

at a fundraising race for victims of domestic violence in Henrico County, 6-year-old Jas Fisher holds out water to the runners. One man smiles through his sweat and reaches out. "Good save little guy," he says. "Mommy, Mommy, he took my water!" Jas squeals in delight, jumping up and down.

"Jas ended up doing most of the work," says his mother, Tonya Jackson. "People thought it was cool that he was out. He got to be a little hero. The police officer even gave him a badge. I knew he would remember that."

Memories like that are an integral part of Jackson's plan for raising her son. She wants him to think of service to others as a natural part of life. "I come from a family of advocates and justice-seekers, so it was always ingrained in me," she explains. "Doing things for people was just what we did. I remember when I was little, my

mom worked as a waitress and was raising three kids, but she always gave the cab driver and hairdresser big tips. We learned that you're supposed to treat people well. You just are."

Youth and family volunteerism continue to rise in popularity. Colleges consider volunteer experience in their admissions process. There are even scholarships that focus on community service achievements. But most parents agree that the greatest benefits of youth service are intangible. Kids who give to others learn compassion and gratitude, values that can override the apathy and violence that so often invade youth culture. These benefits multiply when volunteering is also an opportunity for family togetherness and communication.

Steve Wilson and Carolyn Spinner have three children, ages 6, 9, and 12. They have always been committed to teaching Marq, Katrina, and Elena about service and social justice. Family activities

include everything from volunteering in soup kitchens to participating in living wage rallies. And the family has hard evidence that these efforts have made a difference.

Quiet tears of pride fill Wilson's eyes as he recounts a visit to his children's school during which he read some essays posted on the classroom wall. Children had written about what they would do if they had one \$100. Most of the kids planned to buy things for themselves, but one of the essays said "\$100 is a lot of money and there are lots of people who need it more than I do, so I think I'd give it away to someone who was hungry or homeless." When Wilson commented on the child's selflessness, the teacher told him that he was reading his own daughter Elena's essay.

Teaching children the value of service and the meaning of justice requires more than just an occasional volunteer project. Parents agree that conversations are what really matter. Talking openly about social problems helps kids understand that they can make a positive difference in the world.

When the Spinner-Wilsons moved to Virginia in March 2000, they were confronted almost immediately with a media frenzy surrounding "Confederate Heritage Month" and allegations that Governor Gilmore was condoning racism. While four members of the Spinner-Wilson family are white, the youngest child Marq, adopted, is African-American. Wilson remembers many conversations around the dinner table, trying to help the children understand racism. "They couldn't understand why someone

might dislike their brother because of the color of his skin," he says.

Tonya Jackson believes that explaining human differences and helping children to rise above prejudice may be the most challenging aspect of raising socially responsible kids. She remembers working as a case-worker at an Independent Living Center. Many of her co-workers had disabilities, including one who was about Jas's height and had no arms. Jas was only 4 at the time and understandably curious. "I said something like 'God gives everyone different special gifts and he doesn't give any one person everything. Everybody gets different little sprinkles of stuff, and it's up to everyone to give whatever they've got to other people.' I pointed out that my co-worker could write with her feet. 'And she writes better than Mommy,' I said. It didn't dawn on him right away, but I kept on talking with him and I think eventually he got it."

No matter how difficult, these conversations are always worthwhile. When kids

grow up learning to value other people and give generously, their futures brighten exponentially. In fact, Jackson can only think of one drawback to setting her son on the path of service. "His teacher called to complain that he's spending too much of his time helping the other kids that don't catch on as fast. 'I really need him to just do his work and let me teach them,' she told me. So I tried telling Jas that, but he said 'you said we're supposed to help people!' What could I say to that?" **FS**

If your little one can pet a puppy dog, count change for a dollar, or chat with a retiree, then your family is ready for a community service project. Tina Bessent of the United Way recommends the following family volunteering opportunities. She also reminds parents that elderly residents at most retirement homes love to receive visits from families with children. For more ideas, call the United Way at 275-2000.

Hanover Adult Center – 746-0743

Friendly visitors needed to engage in conversation, assist with scheduled activities, or simply pass the time with participants.

Henrico Humane Society – 262-6634

Help with yard sales, Bingo games, concession stands, gift-wrapping booths, and other fundraising events.

James River Park System – 646-8911

Volunteer projects include litter cleanup along the shoreline and rocks; covering graffiti; trail maintenance; removal of flood debris; recycling; and painting of railings and historic structures.

Refugee and Immigration Services – 355-4559

Act as friends and mentors to newly arrived refugee families, helping them adjust to life in the United States. This is a great opportunity to expose children to people from diverse backgrounds.

Richmond Adult Care Services – 261-0205

Push wheelchairs and assist individuals at the State Fair in late September.

Richmond Hospitality House – 828-6901

Help with cleaning and maintenance so that families will have a nice place to stay while their loved ones are hospitalized. Volunteers are also needed to provide evening entertainment and/or prepare meals for guests.

Richmond SPCA – 643—6785 ext.18

Walk, pet, and play with dogs; assist adopters; groom animals; and/or provide in-home foster care.