



Dell Marie Wergeland - Sharing the Wealth

by Faye Ferguson

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In 1999, Dell Marie Wergeland made her first visit to a third world country. She joined a work team of 14 people traveling to Honduras to bring aid and relief following the devastation of hurricane Mitch. For Wergeland, it was a life-changing experience.

She remembers many heart-wrenching incidents from that trip but one that stands out in her memory was the day she brought a small box of school supplies to a community school. As she approached the school, she noticed the children were all outside. After she presented the teacher with her small offering, the teacher rang the school bell, summoning the children in. As they entered, the teacher announced: "We have pencils and books, we can now have school!" The needs of the destitute Hondurans seemed so simple. "I had never seen poverty like that," Wergeland remembers. "To see people with only what they had on, not having anything to change into; to see mothers concerned that their children were growing and they didn't have clothes for them" brought home the reality of their impoverishment. Wergeland realized that the most basic supplies would make an immeasurable difference to these people. She returned to Victoria determined to help make that difference.

For a year following the trip to Honduras, Wergeland worked with a small group of friends to collect clothing, blankets, household items, medical and school supplies to send to the destitute people of Honduras. The goal was to fill a 40-foot container truck. It took a year to collect the supplies and raise the money to send the container to Honduras.

In the course of getting that container packed and launched, Wergeland's future began to take shape. First, a 5,000 square foot warehouse space was donated to the cause by E.Y. Construction. More donors started to come forward and volunteers began appearing. Wergeland knew there were plenty of impoverished people all over the world who needed equipment and supplies just as desperately as the people she'd met in Honduras. Although she had started looking for paid employment, she felt herself being drawn to this other work."

Her husband was supportive, as were her two adult daughters who told her: "Morn, you need to do this." Finally, Wergeland realized that she had the skills and the drive to make something important happen. The outcome was Victoria's Compassionate Resource Warehouse.

SINCE ITS START IN 1999, THE COMPASSIONATE RESOURCE WAREHOUSE has sent 27 container-loads, each the size of a freight car, filled with supplies, equipment, and the necessities of life, to schools, hospitals, churches and clinics all over the Third World. Countries that have received supplies from the Warehouse include El Salvador, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Liberia, Kenya, Uganda and Romania. Donations come to the Warehouse from all over Vancouver Island, the lower mainland, and as far away as Toronto. The Warehouse is part of the Capital Health Region's medi-cycle program, receiving used equipment from all hospitals in the region. The Red Cross has also been a regular donor as have many physicians and dentists, local businesses and schools.

In the three years since its inception, the work of the Warehouse has grown dramatically. Three container-loads were sent from the Warehouse in 2000, six were sent in 2001. In 2002, 18 container-loads have gone, "It's just growing and growing," says Wergeland. The Warehouse also packs smaller shipments which accompany relief teams going to developing countries. A number of churches, service groups and other charities, such as the Universal Aide Society, help foot the bills for delivery of the huge containers.

DELL MARIE WERGELAND WORKS 60-HOUR WEEKS as co-ordinator of the Warehouse, overseeing every aspect of its operations from donations and inventory to management of a team of dedicated volunteers. She brings the sort of experience and abilities that make it the perfect job for her.

Saanich Councillor Leif Wergeland is Dell Marie's brother-in-law and a director with the Warehouse. He speaks from 25 years of experience when he says: "Dell is a person who makes things happen, with her enthusiasm and her love of people. She always gives 110 percent." Raised primarily in Victoria, Wergeland entered the Royal Jubilee Hospital's School of Nursing in the early 70s, graduating in 1975. In her nursing career, she worked primarily in geriatric nursing. "I love seniors," she concedes.

When her first daughter was born in 1978, Dell decided to stay home rather than seek paid employment. But always active, she soon started a senior's group out of her church. The group, called SHARPS -Sincerely Happy Association of Retired Persons- continues to this day with anywhere from 50 to 70 members. Many of them volunteer at the Warehouse.

Eventually, Wergeland was drawn to paid employment with seniors, first through convention planning and then, in 1994, with the Seniors Hotline, initially a call-in service which has since become a senior's drop-in centre in Sidney. Over the years, Wergeland has been involved with volunteers in a variety of situations. Her knowledge of how to work effectively with volunteers has been critical because volunteering is what it's all about at the Compassionate Resource

Warehouse. "This place is run by volunteers," laughs Dell.

Starting with volunteers from her senior's group, word-of-mouth brought more volunteers. It also brought attention from some agencies that are able to transport the containers. Now Wergeland can rely on a crew of 50 volunteers plus support from a number of organizations. They range in age from teens to oldsters. Everyone has a job. What sorts of things do they do? Wergeland begins the list: "They pack boxes and count the contents. They check everything, making sure each item is clean and in good repair. A lot of the men are involved in fixing things. A group of women wash and mend the clothing. Some volunteers make things like sweaters or toys. A group of volunteers comes down from Nanaimo whenever there is a container truck that needs packing." Wergeland knows she has to tailor the job to the volunteer, tapping into the talents and interests of each person. She has a group of nurses, for example, who sort and label surgical equipment whenever the need arises. Another volunteer is the webmaster for the Warehouse's website (www.crwarehouse.ca.)

The majority of volunteers are seniors. They are, as Wergeland notes, "from the generation that likes to fix things." They've lived through the war and Depression and they know what it is like to have very little. "They will find a way to make something work or useful, rather than just throw it away," which is exactly the attitude that the Warehouse requires. Wergeland gets great satisfaction from seeing volunteers move from viewing the Warehouse as someone else's "thing" to having a feeling of ownership. A sense of common purpose has developed, aided by the fact that everyone, including Wergeland herself, is a volunteer.

The growth and development of the volunteers is central to Wergeland: "Some volunteers come in and know immediately how they can help and they just move ahead. Others are more fragile, or have less of a sense of their own self-worth. Watching them grow and blossom is one of my greatest enjoyments."

ATTENTION TO DETAIL IS ANOTHER aspect of Wergeland's personality which is vital to the success of the Warehouse's operation. While in Honduras, she visited a couple of aid distribution centres and learned a few lessons about how to send things. "I saw one container with mountains of stuff that the people had to sort. There were shoes that didn't match. Things weren't labeled clearly." She knew it could be done better.

Wergeland now inventories every item that enters the Warehouse. This is a huge time commitment, "but I don't pack every box, so it helps me know what we have," she explains. "When I receive a phone call asking if we can fill a certain order, I have a good idea whether we can or not."

Wergeland also puts together the detailed list of supplies of what will go in each container truckload. The list, which is based on the requests coming from the particular relief

organization, is exceptionally detailed. "We are very exact," she notes, "It's very clear what's in each box. That helps with the packing on this end as well as on the receiving end." It also facilitates the movement of supplies through various customs inspections along the route. Wergeland's greatest challenge is "not enough time. I know there is a lot to do; I could be here all the time," she says, admitting to some workaholic tendencies. But she strives for balance and makes sure she has time with her 22-month-old granddaughter, Jaeden Marie, her daughters, Heidi and Cheri, and her husband, Vic. What are Wergeland's greatest satisfactions in her work at the Compassionate Resource Warehouse? "We are meeting a need that otherwise could not be met. We are giving people hope. We are sending the message that someone in the world cares."

The office walls of the Warehouse are covered with photographs of people in faraway places unpacking containers and using CRW's equipment and supplies. The pictures remind everyone involved with the Warehouse of why the work is so critical. Meanwhile, Wergeland harbours a dream to one day follow one of the containers to its destination. "I'd love to be there when a container is opened," muses Dell Marie; "I'd love to see the faces."

If you want to donate to or volunteer for the Compassionate Resource Warehouse, please contact Dell Marie Wergeland at 479-9342 or werge@telus.net.