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How I became a helper the day my kids forgot their gloves

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by Amanda Lubert

Midwest weather is no joke. It's a moody beast prone to extremes. Preparing to stay safe in any season here requires outfitting the family with a whole host of gear. A whole host of prep is necessary for buggy, muggy summers, rainy days, and the biggest beast of all—Chicago winters.

Whether you're only responsible for yourself, or you're in charge of other humans, all limbs and appendages must be covered and protected from freezing temps. Feet must be prepared to navigate snow piles, with a barrier to keep them dry when ice turns to slush. That means bundling up with outerwear appropriate for play time and dress-up days, too. My house is overflowing with jackets, boots, gloves, hats, scarves, and snow pants.

One particularly cold November morning, the bitterness hit a little too early in the season to plan appropriately. While driving my two sons to school, I saw they were wearing hats, but asked if they'd brought gloves. Both boys said no. We left early enough that I was able to run

into a drug store and pick up two warm pairs of gloves. A quick errand that I completed while they sat in the warm car. Easy. Done. Outfitted.

Be mindful that what's easy for you may be a struggle for others.

After I dropped them off, I received a text from my mom, confirming our dinner date.

MOM: Good news! That program I mentioned is growing! Can't wait to see you at 6! xo

Holy epiphany. My initial takeaway from the last-minute glove purchase was that I needed to cruise Pinterest for ways to manage the explosion of winter gear in the mud room. I took for granted the fact that I didn't think twice about buying replacement gloves for my children. It didn't even cross my mind that some kids may not even have one set of winter accessories, let alone a home.

I buy my kids more stuff *because I can*. What if I couldn't, though? What about those kids whose parents can't provide the things they need?

This didn't set well with me at all. I immediately resolved to do something to help the children, no matter how small.

AMANDA: That's awesome, Mom! Can't wait to see you, too! p.s. I have an idea!!!

My mother is on staff at a west-side Chicago school where the majority of the student population is at or below the poverty line. Students wear uniforms and in the winter that includes black hats and black gloves. They offer a program to support Chicago Public School kids in transitional housing (formerly referred to as homeless, but this new definition casts a wider net), [Students in Temporary Living Situations](#).

I wondered what happens if these students lose a hat or gloves. Does a parent or guardian have the means to replace them? I suspected the worst. I couldn't live with the answer. I was going to make sure all of those kids had winter accessories — especially warm heads and hands.

Build with your inner circle.

At dinner, I excitedly shared my idea with my mother. I rambled about my revelation—how I realized some kids aren't able to replace lost winter clothing, and that I could—and would—provide as many kids as I could with what they needed to weather the winter elements and add a bit of holiday cheer. She was immediately on board. She explained how the transitional program works, and the steps I'd need to take.

That year I decided to ensure each of these students received a spare set of uniform-appropriate outerwear. Practical, yes, but where's the fun? I'd package these necessities along with other items I hoped would make the kids smile.

Dignity is the most important gift of all.

From the start, I wanted to make sure that the children—and their families—didn't feel called out by receiving the gift. I appreciated that the transitional housing program offers anonymity to the participants.

These students would receive the present at school, where other kids would inevitably ask questions. *Why'd you get a gift, and I didn't?* I was prepared for terrible misunderstandings and even bullying about the Haves and Have Nots. I was prepared for ridicule when they learned about the program. I'd find a way to respect the kids' privacy.

I decided that to not draw attention to gift, there would be no holiday wrapping. Instead, I would use a slim, reusable bag that could be closed—zipper, drawstring—I figured it out. It had to be small enough to fit in a backpack.

Make sure your help is welcome.

Before I dove into the purchasing, I met with the proper authorities at the school. They were thrilled about what I had now called the Bag Project. My vision complied with school policy, and I was clear to gift away.

Recruit your village.

My mother spread the word throughout the school, and inspired teachers who were excited to get involved. My aunt took on the Bag Project with a passion, and soon we had a (small but mighty) team of helpers!

You can make a huge impact in a short period of time.

In December of 2017, just a month after my big epiphany, the Bag Project delivered 15 children a drawstring backpack filled with warm clothing and holiday cheer. In 2018 (based on need) we gave bags to 13 children.

Each child received the following items:

- School uniform-compliant accessories:
(1) black hat (1) pair black gloves (1) pair black socks
- Festive accessories:
(1) pair fun socks (1) Santa hat
- \$50 Visa gift card (In 2017, we picked out gifts up to \$50 in value, but this year gave the freedom to choose how to spend the money.)
- Vaseline for those winter dry lips
- Candy for fun
- New baseball caps

Bags were delivered to the kids via the school and staff. The kids were absolutely elated! Even those receiving for the second time were surprised and excitedly dug through the bags before quickly tucking away in their backpacks. Plus it added to a lighter and more festive atmosphere in the office as well!

2019 budgeting has begun and we're looking to expand this initiative to reach more kids! Do you know of a school with a transitional housing program or a nonprofit serving clients in the Chicagoland area that could benefit from the Bag Project? Or, are you interested in donating items or assembling bags? Contact Amanda@ACoreSpace.org

You can be a helper, too.

We hope you're inspired by the story of how the Bag Project started with one person's realization that they had something to offer that others needed.

As we enter the new year, it's a great time to reflect on your abilities and resources. *How can your light make the world a better place?*

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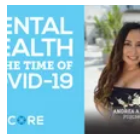
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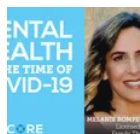
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