

Pay It Forward

SSA Foundation Scholarship winners make a point of helping others.

By John Dunlap

It is the time of year when, amid the songs, festivities, decorations and joy of Santa Claus, we sometimes stop to remind ourselves that the true spirit of the season rests in giving. Helping those less fortunate than ourselves may be a concept we revive during the holidays, but for a number of SSA Foundation Scholarship winners giving their time to those in need is not just a seasonal venture. For Molly Grenchik, Jenny Saba, Amanda Vargas and Krista Bridgwood, giving back on a regular basis comes naturally.

Their giving comes in many forms: building new homes for people displaced by natural disasters, dealing with inner city poverty, fighting cancer, helping teach autistic kids, working with needy children and helping local police with their yearly Christmas toy collection in honor of a young girl killed by her stepmother.

As much as it meant to them to receive SSA Foundation Scholarship money to help with their educational needs, Grenchik, Saba, Vargas and Bridgwood also realize the need to take a good thing and move it along to others. So, in the spirit of giving and to honor those who “pay it forward,” here’s a look at four very worthy and very inspirational women who the SSA can proudly say it helped support.

A Marquette State of Mind

Molly Grenchik happens to attend a university where helping others is a state of mind and a message taught to all its students. While pursuing her degree in medical research from Marquette University, Grenchik also has become acutely aware of the need to help others, thanks in large part to Marquette’s emphasis on humanitarianism.

“As a Jesuit university, Marquette is founded largely on recognizing the value of service to others and avidly encourages its students to ‘be the difference,’” said Grenchik. “I thought I knew the importance of serving the

community before coming to Marquette (through the help of the Self Storage Association Foundation Scholarship), but since being here, I have come to understand it at such an entirely new level. Helping others is infectious, and every little task helps! Whether I’m working on homes in New Orleans or serving meals to the people of Milwaukee, I am helping to repay the community that has also helped me.”

In fact, Grenchik repays her community in a number of ways, the first being that she is a member of MARDI GRAS

(an acronym for Making A Real Difference in the Gulf Region and Areas Surrounding), an organization founded at Marquette by a group of students from Loyola University-New Orleans who were displaced as a result of Hurricane Katrina and began attending Marquette. The mission of MARDI GRAS is to repair and

rebuild the infrastructure in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, with the hope that it will help revive the vibrant New Orleans community.

Grenchik also donates her time to work in poorer areas of Milwaukee, serving meals and conversing with the same people she sometimes sees on her walk to classes. And there’s more: Grenchik participates in an organization called Colleges Against Cancer to expand awareness about cancer and help raise money for cancer research. She finds the organization appealing because of her career interest in the medical research field.

Of Summer Camps and Christmas Gifts

Jenny Saba may be in her third year of earning a sociology degree at UC Santa Cruz, but in the summer and at Christmas, she has other things in mind, like helping kids at an education-based camp and raising money with fellow school mates for a local janitor.



Molly Grenchik (center) of Marquette University celebrates with other members of Relay for Life, a campus group that raises money for charitable causes.

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She works in the summer with children through Galileo Learning, a summer camp program that focuses on science, outdoor activities and art. This past summer was her second summer with the program and Saba feels like she has grown immensely as both a role model and an educator.

“A few of the kids I’ve had the pleasure of working with have various forms of autism, and to positively influence their lives as well as learn from each other has been a great experience for me,” Saba said.

“Last summer I lived in the dorms at UC Santa Cruz and grew somewhat close with a member of our janitorial staff,” Saba adds. “Last December, I announced to my fellow floor-mates and community adviser that I’d like to combine our efforts and money to get her a gift card for Christmas. Almost our entire floor pitched in and I managed the entire project. In the end, we gathered close to \$100 dollars. Handing the gift card to Virginia and knowing the money could be used to make her family’s

holiday experience all the more joyful felt very fulfilling. I think it is important, though, that we share this generosity year-round.”

Traveling the World to Help Children

Amanda Vargas has been working to help less fortunate people in other countries since she was 14 years old. She first started volunteering in small ways, like fundraisers for World Vision and Mercy Ships (World Vision distributes food; Mercy Ships conducts medical missions). She went on her first mission trip to Monterrey, Mexico, when she was 16 with an organization geared toward youth called Youth with a Mission (YWAM). She distributed clothing and food around the city. After she received an associates degree in practical ministry with a focus on foreign missions, Vargas worked as a missionary for the next six years in West Africa, Haiti, and Mexico.

“There are always many basic needs in any developing nation: shoes are a big thing, sometimes clothes,

basic medical supplies and treatment, health education, depending on the area, food distribution,” Vargas said. “However, covering physical needs is only part of it. Many children do not receive the emotional care they need. Some of these children have seen and experienced things that seem unimaginable to us here in the USA. War and poverty takes a hard toll on children, and sometimes love, care, and attention can be just as powerful to these children as providing a meal.”

Vargas is a big believer in the concept of paying it forward.

“It doesn’t have to be anything big, either,” Vargas added. “Just help how you are able to. Since I’m not able to be in another country while I’m in school I try to help how I can. I volunteer every year at a fundraising event for the cancer center in our local area. It is not always about giving money. Don’t get me wrong—if you have the finances, go for it—but it’s not the only way to pay it forward.”

Cops for Tots

Krista Bridgwood is a single mother working in Hickory, North Carolina, with Morningstar Properties. But she always keeps in mind her father’s dedication to helping others. He is a Viet Nam vet (Marine Corps) in Florida and is actively involved in the Toys for Tots program (he’s commander of the program this year). So Bridgwood has no trouble getting behind a local Hickory program called Cops for Tots year after year.

“Morningstar gives five percent of their (storage) units to charity or causes,” says Bridgwood. “The Hickory Police Department had a unit here already and approached me about another unit in which to store toys that they were collecting in memory of Zarah Baker (a little girl from Hickory killed by her stepmom a few years back). I readily donated the unit and the use of our Morningstar truck to help in the collection of the toys. The community donated



Amanda Vargas of National Mini Storage has been doing missionary work with children overseas since she was 14 years old.

so much that the program had to expand into a 400-square-foot unit. It was really powerful to see the community outreach in the wake of such a tragedy. I offered to let the police department keep the unit to collect the toys every Christmas for the underprivileged in the area. We are now approaching our fourth year.”

Bridgwood has a daughter the same age as Zarah Baker and felt that it wasn't enough to just store toys at her facility, so now she works with Hickory police at the distribution center and brings her daughter with her to be a part of it. She thinks it might have paid off, because at 11, Bridgwood's daughter is the first to tell you that Christmas isn't about the gifts.

“I really want to get more involved in veterans' services, especially as they transition back into the private sector,” concluded Bridgwood. “I think we are going to have a lot of displaced service people and they will be in need of job coaching, resume writing, etc., all of which is right up my alley. So, like most people, I need to find a way to stop letting my busy schedule get ahead of me and start trying to leave a little more of a footprint.” ❖



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Krista Bridgwood of Morningstar Properties and Lt. Vidal Sipe of the Hickory (NC) Police Department with some of the toys they have collected.

Charities Worth Supporting

Amanda Vargas is familiar with ways to help those less fortunate in other countries, having done so for most of her young adult and adult life. Here are some of the organizations that she believes most deserve support:

Christopher Farms International works to develop agricultural and business ventures in underdeveloped nations to create jobs, produce food, and generate revenue, all working toward the end result of feeding children. Its vision is to feed 10,000 undernourished children a healthy meal daily. (www.christopherfarms.org)

FIRE International's project, House of Hope, raises up a center for “accepted” girls in Tanzania that others have orphaned, abused physically and have walked away from, or girls who have a disability, are not wanted, and are forced to provide for their families and themselves on the streets through means of forced prostitution. (www.fire-international.org/tanzania-girls-home-2/)

Mercy Ships is a global charity that has operated hospital ships in developing nations since 1978. Mercy Ships brings hope and healing to the forgotten poor by mobilizing people and resources worldwide, and serving all people without regard for race, gender, or religion. These are all volunteer nurses and doctors and ship hands that travel port-to-port performing free surgeries, specifically cleft pallet surgeries on babies who might otherwise be discarded in their society as “cursed” because of their disfigured faces. (www.mercyships.org)

World Vision is a humanitarian organization dedicated to helping children, families and communities worldwide to reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice. They have opportunities to help domestically in the USA and in more than 100 countries around the world, from sponsoring a child to disaster relief efforts. (www.worldvision.org)