

Twilight Wishes

Making Dreams Come True for Seniors

"I was sitting right over there the day it happened," Cass Forkin said over lunch recently at the Dublin Star Diner in Dublin, Pennsylvania, about an afternoon there in March 2002. "I noticed three older women getting ready to pay their bill. All three were counting out their dollars, one at a time, and it looked like they were struggling to afford lunch, which was the \$4.99 all-you-can-eat buffet."

Cass, 43, takes a sip of her iced tea before continuing. "I got the sense that going out for lunch was a really big deal for these ladies and perhaps something that they'd been saving up for. I thought that seemed wrong, and I decided that I was going to treat them."

Cass called the waitress over, slipped her \$20 and told her she wanted to cover the table's lunch. She asked the waitress to keep it a secret, but the women were so touched by a stranger's generosity that they convinced the waitress to spill the beans. She pointed to their benefactor's table, and before Cass knew it, there were three teary-eyed, white-haired women standing before her, who made her stand up so they could hug her. One told her, "We didn't know there were people like you anymore."

For the next few months Cass, a divorced mother of one, could not forget that woman's words. "I realized that there were probably a lot of people who would give like I did if they knew what an elderly person needed."

And this was the simple start of Cass Forkin's Twilight Wish Foundation, a charitable organization in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, that helps the elderly achieve their dreams (think Make-a-Wish for seniors). She developed its mission from previous work as a health-care consultant. While visiting nursing homes, she learned that many residents feel "every day is like the next day, and there is



Twilight Wish volunteers gather with Cass (center, in red) at their Plumstead, PA, offices to look over potential wishes to grant.

nothing to look forward to." After further researching services for the elderly, she discovered that grants are available for senior citizens if they're related to housing or health care—but not happiness.

The foundation, which received official nonprofit status in July 2003, began with lofty goals. "I figured that seniors would want things like massages and cruises," Cass says. But when she had nursing home administrators informally survey the residents of the very facilities where she had consulted, she heard remarkably simple answers.

"Brothers who were 92 and 94 wanted a radio in their room. A man in a wheelchair wanted a blanket for himself. One woman wanted ketchup and salad dressing to put on

Leah Ingram is a writer and book author in New Hope, Pennsylvania, who specializes in celebrations.

William Coory/Black Star

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her food. Twenty-four residents wanted stuffed animals."

One requested a tombstone for her deceased son, a luxury she couldn't afford. It became the first bona fide wish that the Twilight Wish Foundation fulfilled, in January 2004. Since the foundation was still so new and hadn't started fund-raising, Cass was unsure she could pull it off. But in the end everything was donated, from the headstone to the landscaping. A local newspaper covered the story, then another. Wishes started rolling in immediately.

The foundation first set age and income requirements to qualify for a wish, but Cass has since broadened its criteria to "providing a fun experience that the recipients have never had the time or money to do themselves."

Sisters Gail Barr of West Chester, Pennsylvania, and Juanelle Mochel of Doylestown, Pennsylvania, contacted Cass about their mother, Joanne Fulcoy. "Ever since my brother John played ice hockey as a teen, my mother, who drove him to all of his games, wanted to drive the Zamboni ice resurfacing machine," says Gail, 46. "She's always talked about it."

Their mom, also a longtime Philadelphia Flyers fan, was turning 75 in April, and her children were surprising her with tickets to a March 20 Flyers hockey game. John, who lives in Texas, was going to be there, but Gail and Juanelle, 54, wanted to do something more. They knew they were asking a lot: They contacted Cass only a week before the game.

She got started on their wish right away. Although she initially discovered the Zamboni rides (two of which are set aside for fans at each game) were booked, Cass didn't give up. The day before the game she called Gail: Joanne would get her Zamboni ride before the start of the next day's game. Cass told the sisters to take their mother to a special entrance at the Wachovia Center. "When we were ushered to a door marked PRIVATE, I started to get suspicious," recalls Joanne. Next thing she knew, she and Gail were escorted to a special elevator that took them to the ice. They immediately spotted the Zamboni awaiting them. "I was stunned when I realized that they had really gotten me a ride," says the 5'11" Joanne, who was simultaneously



Above: Cass Forkin (right) honors volunteers at the Senior Celebration Event at the Dublin Star Diner. **Right:** Recipients also receive a letter of recognition from Twilight Wish when it fulfills their requests.



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scared and overjoyed at the prospect. "It's a big machine."

Gail helped Joanne, who's had two knee replacements, climb an almost vertical ladder to the top of the seven-foot-tall machine. Joanne plopped herself down next to the driver. A few seconds later they were off. "Once we began circling the rink, the fans were waving and I was waving. I was having a ball," says Joanne. "I felt like the queen waving to her subjects."

"We laughed and cried, but mostly beamed watching her enjoy herself," says Juanelle. When the ride was over, Gail and Joanne rode another private elevator to the sky-box where Juanelle and their family were waiting. After a round of hugs, they settled in to enjoy the game. "It made me believe that wishes can come true," Joanne says.

A few days later Cass received thank-you notes from Gail, Juanelle and Joanne, who included a \$25 check for the Twilight Wish Foundation. (So far, people have donated over \$10,000 to Cass's cause.)

From the beginning, one of Cass's biggest fans has been congressional representative Jim Greenwood, whom she called for help when her charitable-status paperwork appeared to stall in Washington.

"I thought it was a brilliant idea and one that came directly from her personal experience," says Greenwood. "We all get little ideas and brainstorm of good things we'd like to do, and 99.9 percent of them fade away. Cass gets a brainstorm and then just turns it into a brain tornado." Congressman Greenwood and his 80-something parents were among the guests of honor at Twilight Wish's Senior Celebration Event, held at the Dublin Star Diner on April 5, 2004. This celebration, which 60 people attended, recognized senior volunteers who helped get Twilight Wish off the ground.

Congressman Greenwood attributes Cass's success in part to Pennsylvania's large elder population. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Aging, the state ranks second (behind Florida) in elderly residents, with about 1.9 million people age 65 and over.

And Twilight Wish is helping them, one person at a time. To date it has granted 111 requests, including the 24 stuffed animals that the nursing home residents requested way back when. One recent wish was a surprise birthday party for a 72-year-old man. "His only wish was to have an Elton John impersonator," says Cass. "I'd found an Elvis and a Billy Joel impersonator but no Elton John. I was getting so frustrated that I thought of just calling Elton John himself," she added, joking. Not surprisingly, with enough determination, she found her Elton John impersonator at the last minute.

For more information on the foundation, which hopes to expand to states beyond Pennsylvania, visit the Web site www.twilightwishfoundation.org or call 877-TWF-WISH. **FC**