

Cindy Lange-Kubick: Pay it forward ... one year later

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Driving to work last Wednesday, I started thinking about a letter that had arrived in my mailbox last December.

It was written on hot pink paper, with no return address.

The sender had found a \$100 bill and decided to pay it forward, sending a crisp \$20 to five people, asking them to "do something good" with the money.

I was one of the five.

I wrote a column about the pink letter and the money.

I wrote about stealing money from my aunt's purse when I was a kid and, how many years later, I paid the money back and she took what I gave her, waiting for just the right opportunity and then bought yellow roses for a poor, grieving daughter to put on her father's casket.

After that first column money started showing up in my mailbox. People wanted to get in on the giving.

And if they weren't mailing me money, they were passing on ideas with what to do with that \$20, who to give it to, how to make it grow.

One man sent a check for \$1, for the "Yellow Roses for Daddy" fund, he wrote.

In the end, I divided all that cash — \$987 — five ways.

I gave \$220 to each of four places, sending letters along with it, like the original giver had done.

Then I took five \$20s and sent them to five people with power in the community.

"You have received this money because, well, I think you will do something really great with it," I wrote.

Those who received the money were not obligated to share with me what they did with it.

But some did.

"Here is an account of our stewardship of the money," wrote Robert Hughes, who lives at the Cotner Center Condominiums in north Lincoln. "You sent us \$220. Our residents gave another \$220."

They divided the money in fourths and gave it away: to St. Jude Hospital, to People's City Mission, to a single parent in need from nearby Pershing Elementary School, and to "our own dining room waitress, Peg Hampton, who is a conscientious hard-working, single mother of two."

* McPhee Elementary also grew its \$220.

Each grade came up with ways to give back during what became "our first annual philanthropy week," said Principal Bess Scott.

The second-graders had a penny drive for the Capitol Humane Society. Kindergartners made pine cone bird feeders and hung them up in places where the birds would need them. Third- and fourth-graders focused on sending something to children in Iraq.

They posted quotes on the school walls: "The point is not to pay back kindness but to pass it on." (Julia Alvarez)

"How wonderful it is that nobody needs to wait a single moment before starting to improve the world." (Anne Frank)

* At Randolph Elementary, Kiran Bahl's resource room students spread their share around, too. Every classroom came up with ideas for donating. "My group of students will now read through the suggestions and choose one place per grade level," she wrote.

I visited her kids the day they thoughtfully narrowed down the options, voting to help poor people and sick kids and homeless animals. (This same small group of students sent \$80 my way after the first column appeared in the paper.)

* The last \$220 share went to a small business. I don't know what they did with the money I dropped off at their door, but I did have a phone message waiting when I returned to the newsroom that January day.

"I'm just kind of shocked," the voice said. "I didn't have a very good Christmas this year and this couldn't be a better belated gift."

He didn't know how he would use the money yet, he said, but he had some ideas.

"Because one of the very best things about Christmas is making other people happy."

* I heard from just one of the "big five" who got a \$20.

Kim Robak told a group of friends about the letter over coffee, the former lieutenant governor wrote. Women started pulling 20 dollar bills out of their purses and \$100 was given to a student who had been mentored in the Teammates program by one of them. The money would help her out with community college tuition.

"I just thought you would like to know that your good deed is continuing," Robak wrote.

She added a P.S. : "I replaced the \$20 and I am still carrying it around for the next great opportunity to give it away or pass it on."

I know of many other great things that came from that first \$20 wrapped in pink paper because I heard from dozens of people who were inspired to find ways to give.

"I guess it's sort of like the loaves and fishes thing," wrote a dad, who took his Boy Scout troop shopping for the less fortunate and then dropped \$20 in pennies at my door.

"And they say there are no more miracles these days."

But back to last Wednesday.

I drove to work thinking I ought to let people know what had happened with the "Yellow Roses for Daddy" fund.

And then I got busy at my desk and nearly forgot about it.

After lunch I checked my mail.

There was one envelope in my box.

No return address.

Just a sheet of hot pink paper folded around a crisp \$20.

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