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Today's Christian Woman, April 10, 2013

TCW PROFILE

February 6, 2021

Reaching a Community

A stranger reached out with food and love to Tricia Heng when she needed it most. Now Tricia is paying that kindness forward to other families who are struggling.

Marisa Zeppieri-Caruana | posted April 10, 2013

Tricia Heng, of Pembroke Pines, Florida, knows firsthand the difference a stranger's help makes. A divorced mother trying to survive in a dark world without God, Tricia's life was spiraling out of control because of her rebellious, materialistic, and destructive lifestyle.

"I never really believed God loved me, so I looked for love in all the wrong places—men, work, and achievements. It was never enough. When my marriage failed, I tricked myself into believing God would never help me if I couldn't even make my own marriage last," she says. "I believed at my core that God was angry with me because of all the mistakes I made. At that time I was in a destructive relationship, couldn't make financial ends meet, and was knee deep in sin."

The best way she could describe herself was a prodigal child.

Finally one night, two years after her divorce, the desperation of her situation overwhelmed her. Tricia realized she was at the end of herself and needed help. With her world crashing down around her, she started to look up. Despair, combined with feelings of hopelessness and loneliness, caused her to reflect on specific instances from her past concerning God and she reached out to a priest for counsel. He graciously listened as she shared her heart with him. He suggested turning to the Bible for words of comfort.

Hands trembling, Tricia opened her first Bible at the age of 33. "I was in a deep, dark pit," she says. "I was willing to try anything to get out."

During one counseling session the priest suggested Tricia attend a women's retreat being held in November 1996, called the "Walk of Emmaus." She packed a weekend bag and drove to the retreat. Sitting in her car, she contemplated what she was doing there. Not knowing a single person inside, never experiencing a retreat before, and being surrounded by holy women, she believed she wasn't good enough to go inside.

Tricia thought, *Surely the place will fall down when I walk inside*. But she couldn't go back home. With the small amount of courage left in Tricia's heart, she took a chance and walked through the doors of the retreat center. That day, November 3, 1996, Tricia experienced what she calls her "life-changing" moment.

"I finally met Jesus Christ personally. He revealed himself to me through a dance in my heart and changed me in an instant. Knowing that Jesus really did love me, died for me, thought I was important, and had a plan for me, consumed me with joy. Something erupted within me, and I knew I had to let others know how much Jesus loves them as well."

Slowly Tricia's life began to change as she watched God rebuild her from the inside out—starting with her heart. Hope was rebirthed when a woman from a church came to see her that Christmas.

"This stranger offered me and my son food, presents, and a smile," she says. "I sensed God saying through her, *I see you, Tricia. I'm with you. Don't give up.*"

Tricia never forgot that visit. Her faith grew as God reworked every aspect of her life—from her career, to where she lived, to new friends, and eventually to a wonderful new husband, Pete. Four years after the woman from church came to visit her, Tricia felt in a great place in her faith. And as she settled into her newly married life, she began to sense God quietly asking her to step out in faith and do the same as the stranger had for someone else who was hurting and in need.

"I was Hungry and You Fed ..."

The stranger's obedience in reaching out to Tricia and her son was so simple. When Tricia realized it was something she could also easily do, she knew the kind of difference that obedience would make in another person's life. So in November 2000, she began an outreach called Baskets of Hope, in honor of the basket of food, presents, and wise counsel she received during her hour of need. Then in 2006, birthed from that annual outreach, she started a charity, A Place in Time Christian Ministries—based on [Matthew 25:35-40](#) ("I was hungry and you fed me").

To get Baskets of Hope started, Tricia cleaned out her dining room and decided to make that home base. She solicited help from volunteers in her church and community who showed up at her house to create the baskets. They included food, specifically all the Thanksgiving essentials, necessities, and a special message that let the recipient know the hope and love that Jesus offers.

Then through the help of individuals and school guidance counselors, who gave the names and addresses of people who were struggling, Tricia and her volunteers visited each person or family and delivered the baskets on special occasions and holidays.

"I knew this ministry was from God and I obeyed what he was asking of me," says Tricia. "It isn't strictly about the food in the baskets, though. It's also about what baskets represent in the Bible. Jesus used a basket to feed 5,000 people; God used a basket to rescue Moses and raise Paul over a high wall. The basket is a symbol that God is right there in your life, that he is going to get you through whatever you're experiencing, and that your situation will get better. Through Baskets of Hope we get to meet a practical need in someone's life and build a bridge to their heart. When they see our joy and peace, and how happy we are to help them, they want to know what we have in our life that sets us apart from the rest. That is when we get to share the message of Christ and let them know that God has an awesome plan for their life."

Today, Tricia and her Baskets of Hope team deliver 100 baskets a year to struggling families in Broward County, Florida. Over the past decade, more than 4,000 people have received a Basket of Hope. As Tricia has continued to create and deliver baskets, she's seen how God has multiplied the work of her hands. "Today, people who have received baskets from years before are delivering baskets to and sharing hope with other people," she says.

A New Challenge

The joy Tricia received from watching the ministry flourish has played another major role in helping her get through new challenges. In 2008, shortly after her military husband returned home from fighting in Iraq, she began to feel ill. After visiting several doctors and going through numerous tests, she received a "heartless, cold phone call": She had stage 3 cervical cancer, a disease known for its 40-47 percent, five-year survival rate when diagnosed at that stage.

Falling to her knees, Tricia prayed.

"I recalled the last several years and all the things God had done for me—a great ministry and a new husband. I wasn't about to let this thing beat me, so I asked God to use this diagnosis to build his kingdom. I offered my cancer to him and would continue to serve him through it. I knew God would use this situation to draw people to him."

And that is exactly what God did. Over the next year, Tricia saw people pray who had never prayed before. Some even began their own personal relationship with God. "God used my situation to show people that he does heal infirmities and that he will never abandon you," she says.

During her fight with cancer, Tricia endured grueling months of chemotherapy and radiation. Her muscular, marathon-running body became extremely weak, and her weight dropped to 89 pounds. Through that trying year, she never gave up. Despite how terrible she felt, Tricia says she knew God was healing her. Enduring an extremely difficult situation, one that would cause many people to give up or retreat to the solitude of their bedrooms, Tricia felt she needed to do more.

"I told my husband no matter what happened, we absolutely had to continue Baskets of Hope. We had to keep helping the people who needed it," she says. "That year so many people stepped up and stepped out in faith to get involved. I would barely shuffle into the room where everyone was ready to assemble the Baskets of Hope, and I would be stunned and overjoyed to see how many people were there to serve. God put it on my heart that instead of giving Baskets of Hope only a few days a year, we should fulfill the needs of those who are hurting and hungry every day of the year."

And so six months after her last round of radiation, in August 2009, the Bread of Life Food Pantry was birthed, offering food and necessities to families in the western areas of Broward County—areas well below the poverty level. The pantry offers assistance of food and clothing that other agencies cannot, including the Department of Children and Families, and now serves more than 250 people each month.

Looking to the Future

Today, 30 pounds heavier, and celebrating four years cancer-free, Tricia looks to the future. "One thing that helped me get through my illness was knowing God's purpose for my life and clinging to it," says Tricia. "I now know I'm here to help people learn about God and help them find their purpose. One of my favorite sayings is, 'We need to get out of the seat and into the street for Jesus.' Jesus didn't wait for people to come to him; he went to them. As a community, we need to get involved in others' lives. A Place in Time first meets a practical need, such as food and resources, and then we build a relationship. This relationship helps us share the love of Christ, who then meets their spiritual needs."

The ministry that started in her dining room has since become a major organization that is now based in a 2,200 square foot built-out warehouse, which includes large freezers to provide perishable meats and dairy, as well as a new in-house clothing program, helping those who need everyday clothing or business attire for job interviews. She's also added a

weekly worship service and small groups. Resume writing, interview skills, cooking, and budgeting workshops take place regularly, with as many as 25 people attending each workshop.

Throughout the years, the ministry has led more than 50 people to Christ. "People who come to us in need know they're going to get help and also receive the Word of God," Tricia explains.

And if those programs aren't enough, she also recently created the One Voice Project, in which high school students work together as one voice in the community and earn community service hours to graduate. "Students in our program complete 40 hours of community service and put together a three-ring binder containing all the ways they helped provide food to struggling families. In addition to helping needy families, it's a great portfolio piece to have when they apply to colleges or technical schools."

The Existence Of Hope

"I believe we are proof that hope exists," Tricia says. We see ourselves as a doorway to the body of Christ. There is a purpose and plan for every life, no matter what you have done or what mistakes you've made. God will never waste your hurts; instead, he will use them as a way to reach out to oth-er hurting people."

Tricia believes strongly that "anyone can make a difference in his or her community. You do not need a lot of money or space. Just trust in and obey the Lord. He'll do amazing things through you when you let him."

What's next for Tricia and her organization? "We want to start a preschool for struggling families that will offer quality childcare and a Christian education at a fair cost. I'd also like to see Baskets of Hope start in other communities throughout the United States."

Proving that God can take a single person, use her mightily, and turn her efforts into something that helps many, Tricia continues to commit herself to the Lord and the plans he has for the ministry's future. "Everyone at A Place In Time is dedicated to serving God and helping other people excel in purposeful living. It's a big mission, but with Christ, all things are possible for those who believe," she says. "My prayer for those who are hurting and in need is that they will discover their life's purpose and live passionately, while persevering with biblical truths. They too can change a community with a movement of hope and may God receive all the glory."

Hope can truly begin with one person. Tricia knows well that by stepping out in faith, the impact one person can have on the life of another can be indescribable.

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For more information about A Place in Time or to introduce a Baskets of Hope outreach in your neighborhood, please visit www.APlaceinTime.org or call 954-435-7474.
