



Connecting local needs with compassionate givers

By Lisa Moore

When Erin Blackmore worked as a Food Stamp Case Manager for the Department of Social Services, she witnessed the struggle of the working poor who were just beyond the income limit to receive government assistance but were trying so hard to make life work. Many became discouraged because they could never catch a break and there didn't seem to be any help in the community that fit their demographic.

Blackmore realized that they were in need of the power of hope because she felt it encouraged people to keep persevering and believing. Inspired, she founded the non-profit HopeMatch in 2010 as a way to serve and strengthen the working poor. The budding organization serves those who are unseen and underserved with assistance to make a lasting difference in their lives.

HopeMatch started out providing Christmas gifts for families in need but has organically evolved to include other events such as financial classes, mini room makeovers and personal essentials giveaways. At the annual Swap Shop, families can donate items they don't need any more and come back the next day to swap their items for things they do need. The Back to School program matches specific kids' lists with donors who want to help.

"We believe families do not just need help at Christmas time, but also throughout the year. If we are able to come alongside these families, we can be part of helping them get out of their situation," Blackmore noted.

What sets HopeMatch apart from other local charities is the degree of personalization offered to recipients. Blackmore says her group is not as concerned about numbers as they are about the individual.

"We do not have any invasive questions that are asked of the families we serve, we rely on the community to let us know who is in need. Another thing that is different is we try to keep the donors as connected to where they are giving as possible. Each donor receives a real story of what the family they are helping is going through. It's important to us for our donors to know where their gifts are going and who is directly impacted by their kindness."

The Christmas program matches local families in Mecklenburg, Union, Cabarrus, Gaston, York and Lower Iredell counties with people who want to provide personalized Christmas gifts and encouragement to their neighbor. Community members nominate someone they know that needs help during the holidays. Nominations are carefully screened by trained volunteers who

then contact recipients with the surprise call that the entire family will be assisted during the holidays.

Donors that wish to help can shop for the family and receive a detailed wish list and also have the opportunity to receive a thank you card from the family after the first of the year. Alternatively, people can also donate money to sponsor a family and have volunteers do the shopping. Each gift is wrapped, labeled and delivered before Christmas.

Special scribe volunteers write personalized cards to each family encouraging hope into their situations. Many times the recipients say these cards mean just as much as the gifts. One family said, "Gratitude...that is the only word that comes to mind. We are so incredibly thankful for you and what you provided for our family for Christmas. More importantly what you said in the card...those are the words we cling to during this difficult season!"

Part of the culture of HopeMatch is giving back. Families who received help at Christmas are invited to pay it forward by attending HopeMatch's Give Back event to wrap presents for the new families that will be helped the next season. Many who have received assistance from HopeMatch come back and volunteer in other capacities as well. Last year, 123 families were gifted a wonderful Christmas.

Blackmore says families are blown away that perfect strangers would give so generously to them and this is reflected in the thank you cards HopeMatch receives. "I write this thank you letter with such a grateful heart. I was touched beyond belief by the entire process. My children each received amazing gifts that were just what they wanted. And, my husband and I haven't received gifts at Christmas in over a decade. I felt like a child on Christmas morning! I think the most special thing HopeMatch did was show my family someone understood and cared about us," said one thank-you note.

HopeMatch is currently accepting nominations for families that may be experiencing a temporary hardship like an unexpected medical crisis, a job loss or underemployment. Anyone in the community can nominate someone, but cannot nominate themselves.

Sponsors that are interested in being part of something bigger than the materialism of the holiday season are encouraged to participate. Volunteers are needed for gift wrapping and other tasks. HopeMatch also accepts other types of donations outside of just Christmas sponsorships. Wrapping supplies, toiletries, cleaning products, paper products and gas gift cards to help with deliveries are accepted at the office between December 10-20.

"We consider it an honor to bless people in our community who often do not qualify for government assistance but are trying the best they can to make life work," said Blackmore. For more information: HopeMatch.org or 704-271-4636. Part of the culture of HopeMatch is giving back. Families who received help at Christmas are invited to pay it forward by attending HopeMatch's Give Back event to wrap presents for the new families that will be helped the next season.