

Foreword by **RYAN NECE**, former NFL player and founder of the Ryan Nece Foundation

It's you first, me second

GETTING TO THE HEART OF
SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

PAM ERICKSON

vice president of procurement & corporate relations for *Operation Blessing International*

This book is a must-read for anyone who works to make the critical connections between corporation and community. While service to less than privileged populations is her life work, Pam Erickson has dedicated herself to opening doors, maximizing opportunities, and making it easy for corporate America to share its bounty.

—B. J. HARRISON WAYMER
FOUNDER, B. J. WAYMER ASSOCIATES, INC.

As former president and chairman of Standard Textile Co., Inc., I have worked with Pam Erickson for many years by donating textile products to Operation Blessing, knowing that these products will be used wisely. Her compassion and dedication to helping the less fortunate are fantastic. It is my pleasure and good fortune to know Pam and Operation Blessing. Keep up your wonderful work.

—PAUL HEIMANN
STANDARD TEXTILE COMPANY

As an international lawyer and leader of a humanitarian nonprofit in Guatemala, I have been privileged to apply the principles contained in Pam's firsthand accounts of creating relationship mergers. These principles in this book have helped me fuse my work and my passion to serve humanity into one harmonious life journey.

—MARIO BUCAR
PARTNER, CENTRAL LAW

It has been my privilege to work closely with Pam in the nonprofit sector for many years. She has been an innovator and an instrument for social change, using her passion and talents to inspire the corporate and nonprofit communities to work together for the common good of those in need. This book captures much of her passion and creative methodology, inspiring the reader to become an agent for change in our society.

—DAVE PHILLIPS
PRESIDENT, CHILDREN'S HUNGER FUND

“Do you know where you are going to be leaving your mark?” This is one of the fundamental questions that author Pam Erickson asks and helps answer in her fine book, *You First, Me Second*. Erickson is able to share practical stories that exemplify the power of a shared vision, mutual respect and open communication—these lead to “relationship mergers” that have a lifelong impact. *You First, Me Second* is a powerful work that leaders will find valuable.

—CARLOS CAMERON
PRESIDENT, REGENT UNIVERSITY

Pam is right—“When the right people are motivated by the right reasons, they will do the right things.” The problem often is that good people and organizations do not know what to do. That is the power of this book. It tells the stories of successful efforts by companies, nonprofits, and innovative

people to make a difference in the world. Reading their stories should inspire all of us. Pam is just the person to tell us these stories. Her own work in serving the needs of people living in poverty around the world is an example in itself!

—MICHAEL J. NYENHU
PRESIDENT AND CEO, MAP INTERNATIONAL

Pam's efforts in relationship building helped us to engage our sponsors, players, fans, and hundreds of volunteers to serve our community. The Two Teams, One Goal event has become a highlight for the Kansas City Chiefs' and Royals' efforts to eradicate hunger in our city. In the process thousands of people received the assistance they needed. A true home run!

—BEN AKI
SENIOR DIRECTOR, COMMUNITY RELATIONS
KANSAS CITY ROYALS

you first,
me second

PAM ERICKSON

**FRONT
LINE**

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This book is dedicated to my sister Lynda, who passed away in 2011 after a lengthy battle with cancer. Throughout my life she encouraged me to remain faithful, stay the course, and believe that dreams really do come true. Even though she's gone, her words still inspire me.

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Acknowledgments

I WOULD LIKE TO express appreciation to my friend Michael Briggs, who is a living testimony of the selfless “you first, me second” lifestyle. His encouragement, sound counsel, and constant availability have been of incredible value to me.

Michael is a creative consultant who has worked with various companies and organizations for more than three decades, including the publishing and retail communities, parachurch organizations, and some of the largest ministries on the planet. As founder and president of Briggs Creative, Michael is a behind-the-scenes leader who helps to establish and refine strategies for an organization’s growth and success. With his years of rubber-meets-the-highway experience, Michael brings a unique perspective to those he serves. He is truly one of a kind—the type of friend everyone needs on his team.

Foreword

IN MY YOUNG life I have had the privilege of being surrounded by superstars. My father, Ronnie Lott, was an NFL Hall of Famer and was on four Super Bowl teams filled with superstars. In my own career I was surrounded by great athletes both in college and in my seven years as an NFL player. But despite all the very talented players I have been around, none compare to the individuals who make positive impacts in the lives of others on a daily basis. These heroes and sheroes are the true superstars who make our world a better place. In *You First, Me Second* you will not only learn why Pam Erickson is someone I respect, admire, and consider to be a superstar, but you will also learn that no matter who you are or where you are, you can be a superstar too. Pam and I have both learned it's not what you have but what you give that affords you the opportunity to be considered a superstar.

In this book Pam shares a number of stories about other wonderful individuals who embrace the power of giving and champion efforts to make a difference in their communities. As you read these pages, you will learn how others are making the world better and in turn can apply what you have learned in your daily life. Each chapter provides some practical insights to help encourage you to embrace these philosophies, which can become catalysts for performing acts of kindness. Every chapter describes a character trait—passionate, genuine, purpose driven, to name a few—that has helped propel others to become true superstars.

Pam has spent her life developing relationships and leveraging gifts and resources to make a difference in the lives of people around the world. As you read these stories, a flame will grow inside you and inspire you to make a difference in others' lives. We all lead very busy lives, and it's easy to become blind to the needs around us. But after reading this book, all your senses will be aware of the needs around you. I pray that you not only become aware of those needs, but that you also will begin to look for ways to meet them.

Do you want the world to become a better place? We all do, right? Well, like my friend Pam once told me, "Your world becomes better when people help people." I am so thankful Pam took the time to share with all of us these wonderful stories that will inspire us, motivate us, drive us, encourage us, and spur us on to become superstars!

—RYAN NECE
FORMER NFL PLAYER
FOUNDER OF THE RYAN NECE FOUNDATION

Introduction

*Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble,
thinking of others as better than yourselves.*

Philippians 2:3

WHEN I WAS twelve years old, my life was in turmoil. My mother, a single working mom struggling to provide for a family of five, was in a serious relationship that I knew would result in her eventual second marriage. I didn't like the idea of having a new father because I was waiting patiently for my "real" dad to come back home. I was at an awkward age marked by raging hormones and unpredictable emotional outbursts. I was only in the seventh grade, but already was filled with anger, lashing out at everyone around me. My mom's concerns about my behavior were merited as she watched my grade in conduct plummet from an A to an F over the course of that school year. Yes, anyone who knew me could clearly see that I was a young girl in crisis.

However, there was one bright spot during those dark days. It was the day I wound up spending a warm, sunny May afternoon with someone I hardly knew. My mom had a friend from work named Ginny who took a special interest in me. I can only imagine what my mom had shared with Ginny about my unruly behavior, but as it turned out, it didn't scare her away. In fact, she asked me one day if I'd like to come over to her place and go swimming. I agreed to our outing even though I felt it was going to be a bit awkward for both of us.

At her apartment complex Ginny and I lounged outside, enjoying the sun and taking an occasional refreshing dip in the pool. We didn't do much talking at first, but it wasn't long before we were fully engaged in conversation. It all started as I was reading through a short story from one of her magazines. Ginny asked me if I liked to read.

"Oh, yes," I replied, "and I love to write too!" My answer began a discussion between us about some of my favorite books, and I even told her all about a mystery story I had written the year before. For at least an hour I did most of the talking while Ginny listened intently. At various points she appropriately interjected relevant questions that encouraged me to keep sharing.

Before I knew it, the afternoon sun had begun to set, and Ginny said she needed to get me home. I recall feeling disappointed and wishing we didn't have to go. As it turned out, that one afternoon was the only time I ever spent with Ginny. We made no plans to see each other again or even to catch up occasionally by phone. No, that one brief encounter was all we had together, but to this day, many decades later, I hold our conversation very dear to my heart.

What made this meeting so significant to me? Why have I never forgotten it? It was because Ginny made my needs her only focus. For one afternoon the only thing that mattered to Ginny was me.

When Ginny first heard my mom talk about me and my rebellious ways, she seized the opportunity to help me by rearranging her schedule and making me her priority. She invested her time to help me

talk through the issues that were causing me to be so troubled. She listened intently and made me feel comfortable enough not only to open up but also to even share with her my hopes and dreams. Because of her tender, nonjudgmental acceptance of me I felt she genuinely cared.

Ginny's questions were filled with interest, and as we spoke, her concern for me helped me begin to believe that I really mattered. Ginny knew I was in tremendous need of affirmation and encouragement. That day, as we sat beside her pool, she carefully shared words I needed to hear—words that would uplift and, yes, even inspire me to turn my attitude around. Ginny gave me confidence that I could start fresh with a better outlook for my future.

I'm sure Ginny never thought our brief time together would remain a part of me for decades to come. But because she was willing to respond to my need, I became a very different young girl. If asked how I would describe Ginny, without hesitation I would say that she was a "you first, me second" person.

People Helping People

Ginny chose that summer day to give me the gift of her time and attention though she had no idea her one act of kindness would have such a profound impact on me. Her demonstration of value toward me led me to dedicate my life to doing the same for others, initially as a teacher and now as part of the staff of Operation Blessing International. In my position at the global humanitarian relief organization I've secured donations of food, relief supplies, and medicine to help meet the needs of those suffering around the world.

Throughout my years of service I have met many other people like Ginny. These individuals consistently put others' needs before their own, performing acts of kindness without expecting anything in return. I like to call these individuals, selfless, "you first, me second" people because they freely offer their help and give of themselves whether anyone is watching or not. They choose to intervene in the lives of those in need of assistance even if only for brief moments. They are everyday people who make an extraordinary impact on those around them, people just like:

- The hospice volunteer who quietly sits and strokes the hair of one who is dying
- The woman who spends the entire day on her knees scrubbing the baseboards of the house her friend has to put up for sale
- The teacher who gives up her summers to teach so that children who have fallen through the cracks can have a second chance to learn
- The community leader who offers free counseling services for traumatized and abandoned children
- The pastor who opens up his church after hours so that those who have no place to sleep can find safe refuge
- The mom who consistently drives for more than her share of carpooling trips and never utters a word of complaint
- The three-hundred-pound NFL player who spends his day off bagging groceries that will be

given to those in his community who are hungry and in need

- The sweet potato farmer who makes sure he gives the firstfruits of his crop to charity
- The policeman who keeps blankets in his car in case he comes across someone during the night who is cold and alone
- The grandmother who takes care of her grandchildren free of charge to ease her daughter's financial worries
- The son who is dedicated to honoring his widowed, aging mother through the assurance of his love and ongoing presence in her life
- The Little League coach who shows up for practices even when the kids on his team don't
- The widow on a fixed income who gives faithfully every month toward the needs of others
- The coworker who unexpectedly drops off bags of clothes on the porch of her friend so she will have a few more outfits to wear to work
- The boss who anonymously slips an envelope filled with much-needed cash under an employee's desk blotter
- The woman who prepares a covered dish to take to someone who is bedridden
- The man who is always willing to fix broken household items, repair cars that have quit running, or provide free on-call mechanical assistance when needed
- The little girl who uses her entire summer's allowance to buy school supplies for another little girl she's never met

The list could go on and on. These “you first, me second” people have chosen to live each day with the Golden Rule as their standard: they do unto others what they would want done to them.

If people were to describe you, what do you think they would they say? Perhaps they would start by listing your physical characteristics, such as your gender, your hair and eye color, your height and weight—all typical identifiers on driver's licenses and passports. If asked to describe your personality, people might use adjectives such as nice, friendly, funny, smart, serious, quiet, energetic or boisterous.

But what if people were asked to describe the kind of person you are? Perhaps they would describe you as honest, sincere, reliable, genuine, or trustworthy. Or maybe they would say “dedicated” or “kind” to best frame your character. The traits you demonstrate by your words and actions will ultimately define who you are.

The “you first, me second” lifestyle is not reserved for a select few. It is for anyone willing to make more meaningful connections to bring positive change in someone's life. These meaningful connections are what I like to call relationship mergers—people helping people—and they occur in a variety of ways. They can originate in the workplace when teams gather to develop ways for employees to volunteer to benefit the community. They can occur when the leaders of local organizations donate resources to assist those in dire need of help.

Relationship mergers can be initiated when a mom or dad encourages a child to explore ways to demonstrate kindness to a neighbor. They can begin within a church when it encourages members to join in its community outreach efforts. Relationship mergers can even occur spontaneously when one person is prompted to stop by the side of the road to help a stranger change a flat tire.

Today *social responsibility* has become a buzzword as people become more aware not only of global issues but also of the everyday needs of those around us. The core meaning of social responsibility is that each of us is obligated to act in ways that will benefit society. But the *heart* of social responsibility is to make the time to meet people's needs not because we have to but because we want to.

Every day we reveal traits within our character through the choices we make, the words we speak, and the actions we take toward others. It's how we have been designed to reflect God's love for all mankind. Our outward expressions of love for our neighbors demonstrate our value for those we are serving, and they ultimately define our character. As each of us embraces the *heart* of social responsibility, we will become the people God created us to be.

Every day we make choices about the words we speak and the actions we take. If our friends ask us to meet them early on a Saturday morning, *dependability* will cause us to forgo sleeping in to arrive on time. If we are planning to have lunch with a friend and he is on a strict diet, *kindness* would move us to order food that we know he would be able to eat. When choosing to buy a birthday gift for a loved one, *thoughtfulness* will guide us to select the present that best reveals how much we value that person.

Our character guides the decisions we make. This book will help you to develop the character traits and positive attributes that will best equip you to effectively serve others. *You First, Me Second* features sixteen chapters, each one focused on a unique attribute found in a "you first, me second" person. Each trait is first explained and then illustrated through stories of real people who have put the needs of others first. Within these stories you will find examples of relationship mergers between everyday individuals who were in the right place at the right time to demonstrate the right response.

Examples will include community-minded businessmen and women, employee volunteers with a mission to make a difference, nonprofit workers dedicated to serving others, community leaders advocating for their neighbors, and many more, all dedicated to embracing a "you first, me second" lifestyle in their quest to touch hearts and effect change. I've had the privilege of knowing or personally observing all the people highlighted in these pages, and I can attest to their acts of compassion and their commitment to community. Their stories are sure to motivate and encourage you to boldly step out and create your own "love your neighbor" legacy.

The final section of each chapter provides creative ideas and practical suggestions for developing "you first, me second" character in your own life. This book will be your blueprint, helping you to define your core purpose and to start reaching out to serve those in need.

Many people want to make a difference, but often they don't know how. *You First, Me Second* is a *resource* to help you serve more effectively. If you have not yet begun to serve, this book will be your *guide* to getting started. Or if you once served but no longer do, *You First, Me Second* will be your *inspiration* to begin serving again.

The needs around us are enormous—they may even seem overwhelming at times. But in these pages you will find tools that will empower you to make a real difference. It is possible to bring about positive change in this world. It all begins when you choose to live "you first, me second."

Being Purpose Driven

For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Galatians 5:14

THERE IS NOTHING more satisfying in life than having a sense of purpose. One of my favorite Bible verses is Philippians 3:10, and I love the way it reads in the Amplified version: “[For my determined purpose is] that I may know Him [that I may progressively become more deeply and intimately acquainted with Him, perceiving and recognizing and understanding the wonders of His Person . . .].” The verse boldly states that our determined purpose is to know God.

Jesus clearly says in the first and greatest commandment that knowing God is our most important priority (Matt. 22:37–38). He tells us to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. Essentially every part of our being should be engaged in loving God, and the more we invest ourselves in that pursuit, the more we will come to know Him.

Philippians 3:10 also tells us that knowing God is a process: “That I may progressively become more deeply and intimately acquainted with Him” (amp). Getting to know God is a journey, a progressive movement that leads us to grow deeper in our relationship with Him. As you focus your individual faith walk on your purpose—to know God—you will grow from within, and that growth will produce strong character traits such as integrity, honesty, kindness, gentleness, and patience, just to name a few.

As you grow in character as an individual, the second greatest commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39) makes more sense. It is the outflow of what you personally receive through knowing and loving God that is then revealed through acts of kindness toward your neighbors.

Loving yourself is not a matter of pride. It is actually a confidence in who you are and who God created you to be. Loving yourself equips you to give away the love you’ve received from God through deeds of service to others. In this way your life becomes purpose driven. When you fulfill the command to love your neighbor by using whatever gifts and talents you’ve been given to benefit others, you will be pleasing God by taking a “you first, me second” approach to making this world a better place.

When you are purpose driven to love and serve those in your community, the needs you focus on and your availability to serve may fluctuate, depending on your circumstances. What is vital, though, is that you are willing to be used to help meet needs, even at a moment’s notice.

For example, if you are about to go shopping with a friend, and just as you are ready to walk out the door you get a call from someone who needs transportation to an appointment, would you change your plans? Or what if you are standing in line to check out at the grocery store, and the woman in front of you doesn't have enough money to cover the groceries she's trying to purchase? If you have the money, would you offer to cover her purchases, or would you watch as she goes through the embarrassment of removing items from her bag and having them subtracted from her bill?

When you stay flexible enough to meet needs because serving others is a priority, you can live out your purpose to love God over and over and over every day. You will be available for a coworker who needs to unload the burden of her financial struggles or to run an errand for the widow across the street or to make (or buy) cookies for the college kids at church. Performing small kindnesses such as these can help sharpen our focus on others and guide us toward becoming purpose driven. By recognizing that "needs" come in all shapes and sizes, we will become even more alert to opportunities to serve and thus more readily available to help out when needed.

Sometimes opportunities to live out our purpose come from out of nowhere, such as when we experience a serious life interruption. If you discover that one of your family members has breast cancer, suddenly your attention is diverted to learning more about the dreaded disease. You spend hours searching the Internet to gather the latest medical information and facts about the specific kind of breast cancer afflicting your loved one. More than likely you will reach out to your friends, neighbors, or coworkers to find out what they might know about the disease. You realize that your purpose now is to make your family's needs your priority.

As your family member walks through the grueling process of battling the disease, you may find yourself becoming a powerful supporter in the fight against breast cancer. You might decide to participate in a community 5K to help raise funds for breast cancer research or to devote your time engaging in other activities to help build awareness of the disease. The most important thing to remember is simply to remain available to meet the needs that will arise out of life's struggles. Your acts of service will allow you to demonstrate love to your neighbor in the fullest measure possible.

There may be times when we become so purpose driven regarding a specific cause that we become unstoppable in our determination to make a difference. Our ambition rises up from within us to become a force that is destined to bring positive change in people's lives. Sometimes we even surprise ourselves when our positive, can-do attitudes cause us to become determined to do whatever it takes to make something happen. No matter what our age, when we embrace a purpose-driven mind-set, our goal becomes to accomplish the impossible.

Even as an eleven-year-old girl I had the same passion and zeal that has made me the determined, purpose-driven person I am today. Here is my story.

My Purpose Birthed

I grew up in a home in which my mom, a single mother of four, worked a full-time job. We lived in Washington DC in the end unit of a long block of row houses, where a narrow alley served as my makeshift playground. We struggled financially, but as a young girl I never remember feeling poor.

My oldest sister, Lynda, and my big brother, John, played a huge part in creating a security bubble around me. As teenagers both of them juggled their school schedules so they could work part-time, and on every payday, without fail, they both willingly signed over their entire checks to my mom.

Through those lean years my mom kept her ironclad will and dogged determination to hold our family of five together, no matter what. She worked long hours, and I, as the youngest in the family, along with a sister who was a year older than me, became typical latchkey kids. When my sister and I got home from school, we had assigned chores to do, and if we wanted to leave the house, we needed to call my mom and ask for her permission. Most of the time I did my homework and then took a break to watch a little television before starting my chores.

My mom's schedule didn't change during the summers, and neither did ours. We still had daily chores to do and rules to follow, but I did find myself watching more than my fair share of television. The summer after I finished the fifth grade, I happened to catch a special program on TV about muscular dystrophy and its devastating effects, especially on children. It was the first time I had ever heard of the disease, and I remember that as I watched the program, I felt a little frightened.

During the program I learned that a person could host a backyard carnival to help raise money for those afflicted with the disease. When I saw children my own age confined to wheelchairs and suffering from an ailment I could barely pronounce, I felt a surge of compassion within me that could not be contained. My heart became captivated with the carnival idea, and my purpose began to unfold. With tears welling up in my eyes and a sense of urgency in my heart, I ran outside to find my friends and to tell them all about what I had seen. I could barely catch my breath as I shared the carnival details, and in just a few minutes the group was ready to transform our back alley into a passageway for our purpose.

I contacted the muscular dystrophy organization and requested information about hosting a backyard carnival. In less than a week we received an information packet with plenty of flyers and posters to post around the neighborhood. I remember being so excited when our package arrived that as I darted across the street, I ran into a tree. That caused me some downtime, a butterfly stitch, and a little embarrassment in front of my friends. However, in no time our little team of "spitfire marketers" was so convinced that we were going to have the best carnival in town that we even contacted the local newspapers and television stations to tell them about our event.

To get our booths ready, we found old appliance boxes and cut them up to create a beanbag toss and a "fishing" booth. When we were almost finished decorating the front of the game booths, all of a sudden I realized we didn't have any prizes for our winners. None of us had any money to buy prizes, and I had already convinced my friends' moms to bake cupcakes and cookies to sell on the day of the carnival. The two thoughts that kept running through my head were, "How are we going to raise money for muscular dystrophy if nobody will play our games?" and "Who will want to play games without any prizes?"

I didn't let those worries consume me, though. Instead, I took a deep breath and with my head held high, I voiced a determined resolution to walk to the nearest mall and ask for prize donations. At that very moment I was transformed from a pint-sized girl to a purpose-driven ambassador with a relentless will to accomplish my mission: the successful acquisition of prizes for our games.

That day I launched my first journey to "plead the cause" on behalf of those with muscular dystrophy. My sister Jackie accompanied me on the half-mile walk to the nearest shopping center. The two of us skipped along the way, carrying an empty box between us in anticipation of our success.

As we visited each store, I told the managers about the carnival, the afflicted children, our plan to raise money by playing different games, and then our critical shortage of prizes to give to the winners. I spoke with the boldness of a warrior, and one by one, each manager gave a generous selection of

merchandise that we could use for our prizes. In no time at all our box was filled to the brim with prizes, and for the first time I experienced the power of relationship mergers.

I knew that each of the managers had caught my vision, and through their donations I had become the conduit connecting their resources to the need. The excitement of sharing with each of the store managers about the need to raise money for muscular dystrophy placed a desire in me to continue creating relationship mergers to benefit people struggling through hardship in their lives. That experience launched me toward who I am today: an advocate for the poor who have no voice.

Our carnival turned out to be a great success. We raised more cash than any of us ever imagined we would. Our contribution to the muscular dystrophy organization was the second highest total turned in that summer. The event that began with a vision grew into a reality. In our little team the focus was never on ourselves; each of us had personally embraced the needs of the children we were driven to help. As a purpose-driven eleven-year-old girl I somehow knew that this was going to be my destiny.

Today I am the vice president of procurement and corporate relations at Operation Blessing, a position that allows me to be a full-time advocate for the needs of people around the world. Every day I approach companies, businesses, and nonprofit organizations asking for donations of resources to be used for the benefit of people and community programs. I am living out the destiny God placed in my heart so many years ago—and I'm loving it!

I've embraced Proverbs 31:9 as my life scripture: "Yes, speak up for the poor and helpless, and seek that they get justice." I must say that through the many years of speaking up for those who are poor and in need, it has not always been as easy as was my venture to acquire prize donations for my carnival. Indeed there have been occasions on which it has taken me more than a year to finally receive a company's donated resources. With speaking up for the poor and helpless as my purpose, I am compelled to keep looking for food, medicine, relief supplies, and other provisions for those who are caught in the cycle of suffering.

When you run into the challenge of getting those negative responses, and you're waiting and hoping to receive product donations, anchor deep and find your wellspring of strength. Recognize that the rejection is not personal and regroup. You will discover that it is indeed possible to consistently present yourself in a respectful position of asking again and again and again.

When you are driven by your purpose, you will be strengthened in your love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faith, humility, or self-control. Whatever quality you need at a given moment for your relationship with a donor to remain open will be built into your communication with that person. And that quality will define the essence of your character as you continue to plead the cause of those in need.

The following story is about a relationship that I cultivated on my instrument of choice: the phone. I conversed with a person for well over a year before donations from his organization came our way, but the relationship that was built during that waiting period is precious to me and something I will forever treasure.

Joe's Story

My very first conversation with Joe took place when I made a cold call in hopes of receiving donations from a warehouse facility that Joe managed. Joe answered the phone, and our conversation was over not long after it started. I had asked him if we might be considered for a donation, and he had

replied with an emphatic no. But I had kindly asked if I could call him again at another time, and to my surprise he said, “OK.”

Following that initial call, I wondered if it might be a good idea to remove him from my cold call list and just move on to the next person. However, something in me did not want to give up. Perhaps I was motivated by the challenge.

About two weeks later I called Joe back. I was surprised that he remembered me. I still got the no response to my request for donations, but surprisingly Joe said he would put me on the waiting list for groups seeking to be put on the official list of recipient organizations. I jumped at the chance to be on that waiting list. When I asked Joe what number I was on the list, he said, “Thirteen out of thirteen.” I thought that was a good start, and I genuinely thanked him for the privilege of at least being put on a list for consideration! Surprisingly he told me to check back in two weeks to see where we were on the list.

Like clockwork I checked in with Joe about every two weeks. In subsequent conversations we both became comfortable enough in our relationship to even share a few corny jokes. I must admit, though that every time I made my call, my heart was pounding with anticipation that this would be the time he’d offer us a donation. Several months after my initial call we were finally put on the official recipient list, but then we had to wait for our turn to receive a donation. During those additional months of waiting and checking in, my conversations with Joe went from a call for a donation to a dialogue between two people who appreciated each other’s sense of humor and outlook on life.

One day, instead of having to proactively contact him, I actually received a surprise call from Joe that let me know that he finally had a donation for me! We both laughed at how long it had taken—over a year—but I would not trade the phone calls with Joe that led up to the donation for anything in this world.

When we picked up that first donation, I made sure that I personally tracked Joe’s product from the time it was released to us until the final transfer into the hands of the people who needed it most. I sent Joe some stories from individuals who had received his donations of food and other household items. Many of them shared the compelling details of their personal struggles and how much the donation had meant to them. I knew Joe’s heart was touched by their stories.

One time Joe called me and asked if I knew of anyone who needed shoes. He had been cleaning out a top section of the warehouse and found a pallet full of new children’s shoes. He said the boxes looked pretty bad but that the shoes were in perfect condition. As it turned out, only moments before he called, I had received an e-mail from the director of a Romanian orphanage who had asked me if there was any chance that we had children’s shoes available.

When I told Joe “the rest of the story” about the need for shoes in Romania, he couldn’t believe it. He was so taken aback by the timing of his call and my e-mail from Romania that he literally was speechless! From that time on Joe became linked at the heart to meeting the needs of people around the world.

After two years of a great relationship between Joe and me, he retired from his warehouse job. Shortly before his last day at work I asked him if I could drive up to see him and take him out to lunch. He said he could not leave the warehouse, so I asked if I could bring lunch to him. We both agreed that it would be great to see each other before he left, so I found out his favorite foods and packed them up in a special picnic lunch.

When I arrived, there was no place to sit inside the warehouse, so we went outdoors, where I made

makeshift table setting by spreading a cloth across a concrete slab. As we shared lunch, we reminisced about the many times Joe's donations had arrived just in time to be instrumental in meeting very specific needs.

As a farewell present I gave Joe a Bible with his name engraved on the front. I told him that with the number of times he had been the vital link to caring for the poor, his involvement had to be God's perfect timing, so maybe someday he would like to read more about the God who had been watching over him. When I left Joe that day, reflecting on our time together, I couldn't help but feel like I had just dined with a king in the midst of concrete and packaged food.

My relationship with Joe began with a couple of words shared in a very short phone conversation. Who would have thought it would result in a rock-solid relationship by which so many people would benefit? Joe made me a promise the day as we dined together on that chunk of concrete. He told me that before he left his job, he would make sure the decision-makers at his company knew about the integrity of our organization and the genuine people on our staff. His commitment to take care of us has since resulted in millions of pounds of incredible product being loyally donated to our community partners across America.

Even though Joe and I no longer stay in touch, I know that wherever he is, he's making this world a better place. And I'm sure the hundreds of thousands of people who have been impacted by the donations we've received through the years would unanimously agree. When I reflect on my thoughts after that first conversation with Joe, I am most thankful that I didn't proceed with my first inclination to cross his name off my list. I am eternally grateful that I found the strength within to stay focused on leading the charge as a purpose-driven advocate for the poor.

Living “You First, Me Second”

“You first, me second” people live by a set of principles that make them distinguishable from the rest of the world. Let your purpose be driven by the power from within your being. When your own life reflects integrity and strength of character, you will become more available to serve others with purpose and conviction. Do any of the following principles of character describe you? Answer yes or no.

- Do you say what you mean?
- Can you be counted on?
- Do you pay your bills on time?
- Are you fair?
- Do you compromise when you shouldn't?
- Do you keep your word?
- Do you gossip?
- Do you put in an honest day's work?
- Are you teachable?

- Are you respectful?
-

- Do you finish what you start?

If any of the characteristics above are not currently part of your lifestyle, identify the areas in which you need to see improvement. If it is possible, ask a friend or loved one to help you work through the list to see if their assessment agrees with yours.

I opened this chapter with a statement: “Our determined purpose is to know God.” In order for this to occur, there must be movement on your part toward a deeper and more intimate relationship with God. He wants it, and you need it. Find the time to study biblical principles that will strengthen you on the inside so that you will extend the benefits of that strength outwardly to those who need it most. Think of it as spiritual CPR. Inhale God’s words, and then exhale through your deeds.

A great way to get you into the study of God’s Word is to do a topical study on each one of the principles listed above. I have relisted the principles and have identified the topic associated with each one below. Make sure that you have a study Bible that lists various topics along with corresponding scriptures.

- You say what you mean (integrity).
- You can be counted on (reliability).
- You pay your bills on time (uprightness).
- You are fair (justice).
- You won’t compromise (steadfastness).
- You keep your word (trustworthiness).
- You will not gossip (gossiping).
- You put in an honest day’s work (honesty).
- You are teachable (humility).
- You are respectful (reverence).
- You finish what you start (discipline).

As you progressively move forward in your journey to know God, your inward character will develop into the strength you need to love your neighbor the way God intends. As God Himself shapes your character, He will also become the one driving your purpose.

Being an Encourager

*Let us think of ways to motivate one another
to acts of love and good works.*

Hebrews 10:24

TO ENCOURAGE SOMEONE is to inspire him with confidence. Everybody loves to be around encouragers. Encouragers are the kind of people who ooze positivism. The love of life that encouragers can generate naturally creates an atmosphere of anticipation and celebration. Those who spend time with encouragers are sure to benefit from their overflow of optimism, as they bring enough energy to the scene to stimulate even the most melancholy setting.

Encouragers have a magnetic charisma that can pull anyone out of a funk. They can effectively instill confidence and a sense of ironclad strength in others to help them believe that nothing is impossible. Their example of living life to the fullest often leads others to pursue the same.

Encouragers know just what to say and exactly when to say it to inspire confidence in someone who has a defeated spirit. Encouragers have a hearty supply of laughter and quickly transform the gloominess of a dismal day into hopeful enthusiasm. They know how to refresh the hearts and minds of those around them.

Through the investment of their time and energy, encouragers pump life back into the wearied soul. We should all have at least one encourager in our midst who knows how to lift our spirits when we're down. There's nothing like having someone in your life you can count on to say or do something to cheer you on when times get tough.

Encouragers paint a picture of what could be and then spur others on to believe in themselves enough to take the first step toward their dreams. Has someone in your life encouraged you? Take a moment to reflect on what it meant to be on the receiving end of that encouragement and the impact it has had on your life.

Have you been helped through a difficult time by someone who believed in you? Has someone ever urged you to try something new that turned out to be exactly what you needed to change the course of your life? Were you by chance prompted to accomplish something you once thought impossible? I had a friend named Betty whose encouragement did just that for me!

“You First, Me Second” Encouragement

It started one summer when my family moved to a college town in central Texas. Betty and I met at

church, and I found out that she was a professor at the local university. I told her that I had always wanted to go to college, but since I was a military wife with two small children, I had decided that it was too late. Betty immediately responded by telling me that I could do anything once I put my mind to it. I had heard that statement before, but at this point I was convinced that college was too lofty a goal.

But Betty wouldn't let me settle for believing college was impossible for me. Instead she filled me up with "what ifs," and before long I began to believe that I really could go to college. During the following weeks Betty invested her time in guiding me through the college admissions process, giving me a tour of the university campus and speaking as if I were already enrolled. She and I spent time brainstorming to find a course of study that would be perfectly suited for me, and before I knew it, I was registered for the fall semester as an incoming freshman—when I was nearly twice the age of my fellow classmates. How had that happened?

As an encourager Betty helped me to believe in myself. During some of those first college courses it was tough for me to stay focused and not to feel overwhelmed. One time I remember facing a monumental mental hurdle. About three weeks into a basic college math course I became thoroughly convinced that I was going to fail. Betty would not let me give up. Even though she could do the math problems in her sleep, she committed to tutor me every day as I plowed through what seemed like endless pages of numbers.

Betty and I sat down each afternoon and worked through every problem until I could not only solve each one on my own but also understand the steps it took to get the answers. I wound up passing the math course with flying colors, and I know it was because of Betty's encouragement. Betty taught me to not give up and to remain focused on my goal. Her encouragement and confidence in my abilities inspired me to look at life with a new set of eyes. Betty left her mark on my life, as encouragers often do for others, by investing herself in me and giving me the gift of her time.

Not long after I started college, Betty was diagnosed with cervical cancer. She fought a gallant battle, but after only eighteen short months she passed away. During her fight she exemplified bravery and courage. Betty's legacy beats on in the hearts of those she encouraged to continue running the race of life with spirit and confidence. I am only one of many who was positively impacted by Betty's "you first, me second" approach to life. She constantly made herself available to encourage the hearts of those who needed it most.

Encouragers can be influential leaders. They know how to inspire their teams to achieve greatness by instilling the confidence within each person that his contribution to the group is not only needed but also wanted. The positive outlook of an encouraging leader can woo people to join that person in creating a team that is committed to giving a project its best effort. These encouragers have the ability to achieve goals by inspiring everybody in their group to participate and by giving each team member a voice. They can effectively instill confidence in others by firmly believing that as their team works together, nothing is impossible.

I have had the pleasure of working with an encouraging team leader who will go down in history as a legendary example of how to live life to the fullest. His legacy of influence will surely impact generations to come. I met Reggie White when he was the defensive tackle for the Green Bay Packers. Our meeting centered on the issue of hunger relief and how to serve at-risk communities—neighborhoods with low incomes, low high school graduation rates, and high unemployment—across America. Here is his story.

Reggie White, the “Minister of Defense”

An article on the Internet caught my eye. It was about the community investment efforts the Campbell’s Soup Company was leading through a partnership with Reggie White. Reggie had been selected as Campbell’s Chunky soup’s spokesperson of the year. The article stated that the football player would be earning donated cans of soup from Campbell’s—twenty thousand cans for every tackle and fifty thousand for every sack he made during the regular season. All the cans of Chunky soup that Reggie earned would be donated to a national food bank network. *

Being an avid football fan, I knew that Reggie would surely be earning a lot of cans over the course of the entire season. Operation Blessing also worked with hunger relief, but since it was not a part of the food bank network receiving the donations, I wanted to ask Reggie if some of the soup he earned could be donated to us as well.

So I wrote Reggie a letter on behalf of the hungry people across America whom our organization served. The letter explained that we too had a national hunger relief program that served thousands of people, and I asked Reggie if organizations like those within our network would be able to receive some of the donated soup.

After finishing the letter, I sought out the best way to get it to Reggie before the plans for the soup can donations were solidified. After making multiple phone calls and networking with the Green Bay Packers’ community relations department, I was given Reggie’s fax number. I took a deep breath, crossed my fingers, said a prayer, and then faxed the letter.

Within a day I heard from Reggie’s personal assistant, who told me that Reggie had read the letter and that he wanted to give our organization some of his earned cans. What an encouragement it was for me to hear those words! The assistant gave me the name and phone number of Reggie’s agent. The rest is an incredible story of how the request for donated cans evolved into a huge multistate project that encouraged thousands of people living in underserved communities across the country.

During one of my conversations with Reggie’s agent, I learned that Reggie had suggested that I visit Campbell’s headquarters and discuss the details of the donation with the marketing team in charge of the program. I made some calls, flew to Newark, New Jersey, and then drove to the city of Camden, the home of Campbell’s corporate offices. There I met Syd, who was part of the team that had created Reggie’s Chunky soup television commercial.

The commercial was definitely a product of advertising brilliance—if you saw it, you remembered it. Reggie’s mother was featured as a Green Bay Packer cheerleader. She popped out of the overhead luggage compartment on an airplane holding a can of Campbell’s Chunky soup in her hand and urging everyone to join Reggie and the team in seeing to it that Campbell’s Chunky soup cans were in kitchen cupboards across America. Syd and his team had done a fabulous job. I wound up having a great meeting, during which all the people I met encouraged me to continue to focus on meeting hunger needs across America.

As a result of a fabulous football season in which he made numerous tackles and sacks, Reggie earned more than a million cans of Chunky soup. He fulfilled his promise to us by giving us multiple truckloads of soup cans as part of the generous donation from Campbell’s soup, a company truly committed to community investment. When we distributed the cans to hunger relief organizations and food pantries, the encouragement coming from people was incredible. The hearts touched through the generosity of both Campbell’s and Reggie were too numerous to count. But the story doesn’t end

there.

The following year was Reggie's final season as a Green Bay Packer. Because our organization led a strong domestic hunger relief program and because it was Reggie's last year playing at Lambeau Field, Reggie and I discussed hosting a food distribution event in each of the cities where the Packers were playing away games that season. Because of his "you first, me second" mind-set Reggie wanted this to be a special commemoration of his love for people and to serve as encouragement to those experiencing economic difficulties across the country.

The details that would need to be managed seemed overwhelming. However, it wasn't long before Reggie, with his big smile and encouraging words, had me thoroughly convinced that the job could be done. As a result, I took a step of faith, and together Reggie and I organized large community food-distribution events in eight different cities during Reggie's final season as a Green Bay Packer.

Because of Reggie's heart for people, the impact of the combined events that season was overwhelming. More than sixteen thousand people received the encouraging message that someone cared about them. Even when there was inclement weather, large crowds of people waited patiently in line to receive the food they knew would make a difference to their families. Directors of church food pantries, community feeding-program leaders, and volunteers from local food banks were buzzing with excitement. Indeed, Reggie encouraged people to believe that even in hard times, there is a reason for hope.

The season's final event took place in a parking lot in Green Bay on a snowy Wisconsin day on which the temperature plummeted to nine degrees Fahrenheit. Even the freezing temperatures did not keep people in need of food from coming to the site. I remember one family with at least four small children who huddled close together to stay warm while waiting in line. A little girl in the middle of the cluster not only had no coat but also was scantily clothed in light pants and a sleeveless blouse. I gasped in horror, and just as I was about to move toward the family, I caught sight of a volunteer who had been helping distribute groceries taking off her coat and immediately giving it to the little girl.

It was a spontaneous act of kindness that literally took my breath away, and watching it occur right in front of my eyes will most assuredly keep this great example of human compassion indelibly stamped in my memory. It was not long after I witnessed this special moment that I saw the same woman sobbing on the shoulder of one of her friends. With a voice of brokenness she sighed that she could not believe that the need was so great right in her own backyard. She wasn't going to stop with just the Green Bay Packer event. She was determined to do more, and that day would only be the beginning of her journey to make a difference in her community. Reggie's encouragement to reach out to communities in need inspired this woman to continue the work that he had started.

After his banner year with the Packers, Reggie moved on, but his encouragement had spurred other teams to carry on his legacy of NFL community food distributions. The program, now well over a decade later, still has the signature of Reggie's smile and his generous heart.

It was a day of great sadness for all of us when we learned of Reggie's sudden passing. Not long after Reggie's death, I received a call from Campbell's Soup letting me know that they wanted to donate cans of soup to Operation Blessing in Reggie's honor. They asked if we would be able to help them make that happen, and I gave them my assurance that we would be honored to help in any way we could. I made an inquiry call and found out that we could deliver the donated soup cans to a pantry in Green Bay that was the same location where we had once hosted a community food distribution. I reassured Campbell's Soup that we would be able to deliver their donation as soon as it was ready to be

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