

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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The time between Thanksgiving and mid January is always so special on DX Hill. Everything is so crisp, colorful and special. People are more cheerful during this holiday season and even in this troubled world; they find some extra love in their hearts to share with their friends and total strangers. Regardless of how many Holiday seasons have come and passed, every one is special and full of anticipation of excitement and joy. But this year is different for thousands of people in Florida where four hurricanes that ripped through their homes in August and September changed this holiday season dramatically. One or more of the storms left an unforgettable memory in its path for the thousands of families and individuals who were directly affected. Despite the dreadful backdrop of the events they've experienced, about two thousand children who were made homeless by the storms and will experience a different holiday season from any Hanukkah or Christmas they or their parents had anticipated for 2004. No, it surely won't be the most wonderful one they have ever had but it may not be the worst either, thanks in part to ham's generosity.

This year, they will receive toys and games sent to them by total strangers all over our country. These strangers are fellow Amateurs who were rallied to share their naturally generous spirit with homeless children they will never meet. This unique gift program was quickly put together by ARRL following the heart breaking report of a single returning FEMA volunteer who described the depth and extent of the devastation she saw while working in Stuart, Florida. What struck her most vividly was the sight of all those terribly empty faces on the children who were still in shock from what had happened to them and their homes. This entire event reminded all of us of the significance of one of childhood's most simple but precious and lasting memories, receiving gifts from loved ones at Holiday time and sharing a loving home together.

It likely goes without saying that Charlie and Mary's little home on DX Hill is not unique with regard to the feelings of love and kindness in and for their community, except possibly for how very strongly they feel about their many friendships and varied interests. That's what gives meaning to their lives and makes them different from others who simply exist. Last week, Mary overheard one of her crafts partners and close friends talking about her husband's elderly sister, "She may be alive but she surely isn't living." Upon asking further, Mary learned that this lady had lost her husband and only child, son Alex nearly 50 years ago in a serious auto accident. It happened in early December of 1955. She was supposed to be with them that Saturday, doing Christmas shopping but stayed home in bed with a very bad case of flu. It's quite certain that the terrible accident would have taken her life along with those of her family's. She's gotten through the grieving of course but after all these years, she's still carrying a deep feeling of guilt that she shouldn't have been left behind, separated from those she loved. She genuinely feels as though she doesn't belong here on earth. She has tried to find some solace by being active in crafts and teaching in their church's Sunday school. She's volunteered to help displaced people following disasters by volunteering through the Red Cross and Salvation Army. But, except for craft work and taking care of her two Himalayan cats, she's always sought volunteer work that dwells on problems and negative situations.

Her personal issues persisted unabated until she essentially gave up everything except her love for designing and producing embroidery and her cats. But even in her embroidery, Mary's friend told her about the darkness she always carried with her and how it showed in her work. All the pieces she had ever designed were certainly beautiful and meticulously done but in dark drab colors and patterns, absolutely lacking in any "joie de vie" as some would say, never anything in bright and happy colors, never anything light and cheerful, even at this time of year. It was so sad to even speak with her, Mary was told by her friend. She hardly ever talks about something without including a reference to her husband's favorite sweater or that Alex didn't like some food. They have never left her daily thoughts.

Of course, Mary's entire being is opposite to this. Mary personifies the joy of life and has a marvelous sense of humor as well. She cannot begin to presume that she understands the level of heartache this lady feels but she probably would have handled it differently, knowing the way she reacts to all sorts of things. It became clear to Mary last week when she heard about this poor lady that she had to meddle to some extent and try to help this sad soul, especially at this joyous and irreplaceable season of bright and glorious sights and sounds. We only come through this life once and failing to enjoy the sights, sounds and love for one another that is so plentiful now seems unacceptable, regardless of how valid her motive might seem.

Mary came home that day and told Charlie about what she had learned. Charlie was uncharacteristically quiet as he listened to the details of Mary's story. He tried to imagine the problem and how she must be in

such torment trying to live with herself. Being the consummate engineer and manager, Charlie likes to find solutions to problems he faces by modeling them mathematically or comparing them to other similar problems he has faced in his extensive experience. But this one was definitely a challenge, even for the old master.

Over the years, Mary felt very sure that others must have tried to change this lady's viewpoint or behavior but without success. She felt that she must at least try or she'd never forgive herself. Especially at this time of year, she could not be allowed to wallow any longer in what appears to be the makings of her own self pity.

Charlie suggested to Mary that she find out this lady's name and phone number or where she lives. He told her he might have an idea. Mary smiled and wagged her finger saying, "Now, don't go doing something you'll regret, dear. This isn't a broken radio to be fixed." Charlie promised that he wouldn't.

Mary called her friend soon after dinner that evening. Charlie didn't choose to overhear Mary, so he took his old faithful pal, Rufus out for a little walk. The hound's wagging tail told him how pleased he was to accommodate. He'll do anything for Charlie, even a sacrifice like this. Actually, he loves walks anytime of the day. The two old pals were walking down the front walk as Mary's call was answered. Mary told her friend what Charlie wanted to do and asked if she knew this lady's address or phone number. "Why yes, of course I do Mary. What is it that Charlie has in mind? I doubt that she'd be interested in getting a ham license," was her reply. Mary laughed and said that she was sure that wasn't Charlie's intent. However, she knows him well enough by now to simply trust him when he says he has an idea. Mary carefully wrote out the lady's name, address and phone number as her friend slowly read it to her. They spoke more about what idea Charlie might have in mind. After all, he doesn't even know this poor thing. How can he think he can help her?

Charlie and Rufus were gone for quite a while. Mary had finished her phone call and was back sitting in her favorite chair working on one of her embroidery projects by the time her two "boys" returned. She asked, "Well Rufus, did you help Charlie with any suggestions?" He just looked at Mary with his big sad hound eyes and headed for his big soft dog bed. Charlie replied, "Actually, Mary, he actually may have solved the problem or at least given me an idea that might do the trick." Mary smiled and replied, "You're not serious, are you?" Charlie nodded that he surely was.

As soon as he got his coat off and poured himself a fresh cup of coffee, he headed for the shack where he kept his address directory and his old comfortable chair. Before anything after sitting and taking a sip of coffee, Charlie swung the dial through the low end of 40 and then 20 meters to hear what might be lurking. Doing this is as natural as breathing and can't be overdone.

Hearing nothing of interest, he proceeded with the reason that brought him to the shack. He found his old dog eared address book and looked up a particular number. He dialed the number leaned back, taking a sip of coffee. "Hi Doug, Charlie here. How've you been over there on the next hill toward VK land?" He listened and chuckled at what Doug reported. "Well, I understand. I barely finished my antenna work here before freezing my fingers. Next year, we'll both start our fall maintenance earlier in the season, won't we? How about July?" Charlie laughed again and noticed Mary standing in the door, obviously interested in whatever the idea was that Charlie was tracking down. Charlie covered the phone and took Mary's hand and suggested that she take the guest chair.

"Doug, I learned about a serious problem one of our ladies here near DX Hill has that Mary and I are trying to help to fix. It may not work but before I call her and try to convince her to let us get involved, I need some of your help. If you have a minute or two, I'd like to tell you about it." Doug obviously replied positively and Charlie proceeded.

"I just walked 'ole Rufus after dinner and he gave me an idea. Yeah, that's right. He did." He laughed and continued, "Every year, your club does that project to benefit the county animal shelter when your guys dress up as Santa and his helpers and invite animal lovers to come and bring their pets to get a picture or two taken with Santa. I can remember hearing you say when Rufus and I dropped by that you're always in need of help dealing with the people who have trouble waiting in line or for their proof pictures or whatever. Is that still the case?"

Charlie heard that it was and continued, "Well, Rufus usually comes by and hangs around with the crowd every year. He likes to meet new friends, you know. This year, while thinking about that a little while ago, I

wondered if 'Mrs. Claus' along with Rufus might be able to help working the line and try to keep people's attitudes a bit more mellow while they're waiting around."

Doug responded and Charlie listened. Mary sat in anticipation as Charlie gave a thumbs up sign. "That's great, Doug. Now all I have to do is convince her that you and I aren't totally out of our minds with the idea."

After more chat and ending the call, Charlie discussed the plan with Mary. It just might work, they figured. But, neither had any idea how the main person in this would react to it. Mary offered to make the call and find out. She might be intimidated receiving a call from some strange man with such a crazy plan. Charlie stayed in the shack and found some watery signals on 40 meters which meant that long path under the South Pole to SE Asia was very likely making an appearance. Mary went into the kitchen and made a cup of her favorite green tea before sitting in her chair. She dialed the lady's number and waited. After three rings, Mary started to think of either hanging up or figuring out what sort of message to leave on her machine if she had one.

But instead, a thin hesitating voice answered, "Hello..." Mary introduced herself as a fellow crafter and wondered if she had a moment to speak with her. Mary learned that she knew all about her. Crafters all over the valley and probably further, know Mary from her crafting and her legendary cooking. The lady's name is Irene and Mary knew she had two cats but in her conversation, she learned that Irene really loves cats as well as dogs and most other animals. That was such a relief to hear! Irene may possibly like the idea Mary was about to suggest.

Mary learned, as in so many other things in life, knowing only a part of a story will lead to a very wrong conclusion and often problems. She said that she knew about Irene's tragic loss of her husband and son some years ago and how it has affected her all these years. Irene replied that she's still very sad whenever she thinks about losing Jack, her husband and Alex, her son. Every December, it all comes back and it's hard for her to think about anything else until January. Mary quickly launched into the idea that Charlie, Doug and Rufus had considered. To Mary's surprise, Irene absolutely loved the idea and started to cry. Irene explained, "I knew about this fund raising project they did every year to raise money for the animal shelter but I didn't know how or who to ask. Jack would always make those calls for me because I'm too shy. One time a few years ago, I brought my two beautiful cats to the center and had them take a picture of them with Santa. I love the picture but can't look at it without crying. It's just terrible."

Mary choked up as she realized how significant all this was becoming. From Rufus to Charlie to herself and to Irene, a total stranger. God surely does move in peculiar ways. She explained more of the idea's details and then put Charlie on the phone while she looked for a tissue. Charlie thanked Irene for her help and explained the times and place to come for getting into her "Mrs. Santa" outfit before the scheduled event. They ended the call with Irene saying thank you over and over again.

The rest of the story, as Paul Harvey would say is that Irene arrived early on the designated Saturday and worked all day with the crew. She never lost her smile, not for one second and loved every moment of "working the line", talking with the pet owners, asking the pet's names and then scratching their ears. She even posed for a few pictures when the clients wanted Mrs. Claus in their picture with Santa. They saw dogs and cats, of course. But, also rabbits, ferrets, parrots, even a pet skunk and snake. That took some courage but Irene smiled none the less. They even did an outdoor picture with a pair of adorable American Shetland Ponies the owners brought in their own trailer, wearing big red bows on their harnesses. It's a safe assumption that from this point on, instead of dreading it, Irene will look forward to the Christmas season and meeting all these wonderful animals. She even decided to join the health club for seniors to exercise and get into better condition for next year's fund raising event. She found that her knees aren't very happy with all the bending over and kneeling to scratch the ears of our little friends. She said upon leaving that day that she feels 20 years younger despite her aches.

Many happy people and four legged friends were affected this year by a small but marvelous manifestation of the season's love and blessings. Rufus believes we would all benefit from communicating more often with our four legged friends.