

Longtime philanthropist Linda Greenberg moving to Florida

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Everyone involved in homeless services knows Linda Greenberg, a petite, energetic woman who founded a Christmas drive for the homeless and ran Thanksgiving dinners at Camp Letts for years.

But those who know her best tell of a dedicated mother, sister and wife who saw the good - and need - in everyone.

"I believe her love and devotion to family is probably foremost, and she'll tell you that comes before anything," said Ellen Reiner, Greenberg's older sister.

It's that devotion to family that will take Linda and David Greenberg from their hacienda-style farmhouse in Crownsville to Delray Beach, Fla., next year to be closer to their sons.

"She is definitely a juggler, and the balls all end up in the right place," Reiner said.

Born in Pittsburgh, Greenberg said she enjoyed an "ideal" childhood. Both of her parents were philanthropists.

"My father always taught me, 'If you have more than you need, give it away,'" she said.

On a winter trip to Washington, D.C., with her mother, Greenberg remembers seeing a homeless man trying to stay warm.

Her mother asked her to give the man her coat.

"For the first time I was cold," she said. "It made such a profound impression."

After her parents' divorce, Greenberg moved with her mother and sister to New York, then to Baltimore when she was 22. She attended the University of Miami and American University and finally studied in Mexico City, but she never graduated.

"If I had one regret, I regret that I didn't finish my education," she said.

She and David got married in 1972 and then moved to a small farm in Crownsville. They've lived there ever since.

"It's the best place in the world to bring up children," she said. "I thought I would be buried in the backyard."

David Greenberg ran Greenberg Jewelers in Brooklyn park, and Linda Greenberg raised their two sons, Marc and Cory, and countless animals from chickens or a pig to alpacas, fainting goats and miniature horses and donkeys.

She was active in the Cancer Society, The National Society of Jewish Women, Hadassah and organizing fundraisers for the Kidney Foundation.

After her mother died of a heart attack, Greenberg organized and ran a "Walk for the Heart" with the Heart Association in Annapolis.

"It was the biggest fundraiser in the county," said Shirley Lieberman, the chapter president. "It's her personality, she never takes 'no' for an answer."

'My life changed'

Greenberg's homeless ministry began when her sons were 5 and 6 years old. She remembers watching a program about a child who had his own

ministry, and thought about everything she had.

"I was filled with guilt. I said, "It's not fair that I have this," she said. "That day my life changed drastically."

At first, Giving Back was just the Greenberg family collecting blankets or bag lunches and spending a day handing them out to the homeless in Baltimore.

As the boys grew older, they took their hockey teammates along, and the word spread.

"People started to know that we were helping," she said. "It became all-consuming."

Ellyn Whiteside remembers when she first met Greenberg at a fair in Timonium 15 years ago.

Next thing she knew, Whiteside, a hair stylist, was spending her Christmas Eve giving haircuts to the homeless while other volunteers passed out donations. She's been doing it every since.

"Linda has a gift from God - it's like magnetism," she said. "When she puts her mind to do something, there's nothing on this world that can stop her."

Marc Greenberg describes his mother as a "sort of Santa Claus."

"She really cares about people. Every since we were little, she instilled that in us."

And Cory Greenberg remembers watching his mother give her own hat, gloves and coat to a homeless person.

"She always puts others before herself," he said. "She's always looking to do

things for people."

Meeting the homeless men, women and children motivated him to give back as well.

"It's very fulling," he said. "It made me want to give back even more."

That was her goal, she said.

"That's the whole idea, to get the children inspired," she said. "What I want to leave with this whole thing is that you have got to communicate with your children."

'God kept me alive'

Greenberg gave up the leadership of her organization a few years ago, but that only gives her more time for her newest effort, 4 Uganda.

"Of course we have tremendous needs here, and we need to help. But (the children in Uganda) are the poorest of the poor," she said.

4 Uganda started about two years ago after she survived a traumatic car accident in Florida.

"It was a miracle," she said. "I knew God had kept me alive (for a reason)."

While on a trip to Uganda to see mountain gorillas, she met a young boy named Brian. His mother had died in a car accident a few years before.

"I knew at that time that God had brought me halfway around the world to meet this kid," she said. "I felt he was another son to me."

She paid his tuition at a boarding school in Iowa, then founded 4 Uganda to

fund other children's educations, protect gorillas and build a medical clinic.

Her parents' gift

"(Philanthropy) is a gift that her parents gave her," David Greenberg said. "She always thinks of other people."

Living with her is an adventure.

"It's like living with Lucy, you never know what you are going to come home to," he joked.

The Greenberg farm house is filled with mementos from their travels, from Africa to Russia and summer vacations in Jamaica.

But she didn't want to talk about her travels.

"They're not important," she said. "The only way to really have happiness is to give back."

Reiner said she is amazed by her sister's energy.

"I don't know where she gets the fortitude, I don't know where she gets the drive, I just find it magnificent," she said. "She just turned out to be a better person than me."

Marieta Burkhart has been a friend and fellow volunteer with Greenberg for 20 years.

"She's like family," she said.

Burkhart watched her friend's animals while she was traveling, and their children grew up together. Sometimes, the two women would go into

Baltimore by themselves.

Once, Greenberg pulled a scarf right off her friend to give it away.

"She said, 'You have another one,'" Burkhart remembered.

Stories like Burkhart's were flowing at an appreciation dinner last week hosted by Steve Anstett, who took over as executive director of the Giving Back organization in 2004.

"She is an amazingly dynamic person, she has an amazing gift for seeing the good in everyone," he said.

The organization has grown into an official, stand-alone nonprofit, and with that comes a new name: Giving Back, Linda's Legacy.

It's a legacy to be proud of.

"It goes back to the idea that in God's eyes we're all the same," she said.

"There but for the grace of God go I."