

Hands-On Help

While others look away from trouble, this lady digs in and gets to work

BY KARENNA GORE SCHIFF

I REMEMBER the first time I saw Gretchen Buchenholz doing what she does best. It was the fall of 2002, and she was standing at the door of a New York day-care center she'd started for disadvantaged and special-needs children. A stream of little kids were entering the building, some using their walkers, some with other physical challenges. Gretchen knelt down beside each child, greeting each by name and saying something personal. The kids grinned and giggled shyly; every one of their little faces lit up.

A few weeks later, Gretchen told me that one of the boys who had



Gretchen Buchenholz, left, with Karenna Gore Schiff in New York City, December 2005.

come through the door that morning and every other morning for the past several years had died from his terminal illness. "He was a beautiful, happy boy," Gretchen said, in tears. I later learned that she often served

as a support system for families who had endured crushing losses like this one. I was struck by how nurturing Gretchen was, how out of the way she went for the children and their families. Around this time, I decided to change jobs. I'd been working as an attorney, but for the next two years I decided to serve as director of community affairs for the Association to Benefit Children (ABC), the nonprofit group Gretchen founded some 20 years ago.

Growing up as the daughter of Al and Tipper Gore, I'd always known my work would involve helping others in some way. When I was 11, my mom, sisters and I were walking in downtown Washington, D.C., when we passed a group of homeless people in tattered overcoats, sleeping on grates. My sisters and I asked my mom why people were out on the street like that. She replied, "Actually, we should try to help them," and then marched us over to a nearby soup kitchen to volunteer. The idea of becoming part of the solution to a problem stuck with me.

After I married and moved to New York, I began hearing about Gretchen Buchenholz. People told me how this native New Yorker and mother of six had worked on behalf of needy and marginalized families for years in the city, and how she was a hands-on, skilled advocate. She did everything from buy groceries for homeless families to start schools for children. In 1974 she founded Merricat's Castle, a nursery

school that opened its doors to kids of all racial and economic backgrounds, the able-bodied as well as those with disabilities or terminal illnesses. (It's still going strong.) She also ran a soup kitchen for the homeless and worked on behalf of children born with HIV, helping to get the care they needed from the moment they tested positive.

I thought, I want to meet this person. Still, I felt a little intimidated. What would she be like? She was a pioneer, after all. And what had I really done in my own life to compare?

I met her in a Manhattan diner and was instantly charmed by her warmth and salt-of-the-earth qualities. She has little time for superficialities or small talk. Instead she's diligent about defending those who need someone in their corner and getting the best outcome for them, regardless of their situation.

The story of how she started ABC is pretty amazing. In 1984 she was on her way to a government office to get a day-care permit when, by accident, she entered a room where homeless families were waiting to be placed in a "welfare hotel." She saw three bare cribs with babies lying in them. The children wore no diapers (their parents couldn't afford them), and the room was filthy. After talking to the parents and learning they and their children were hungry, Gretchen marched out and bought bread, peanut butter, apple juice and diapers. Then she

started making phone calls. She dialed the American Red Cross, City Hall and *The New York Times*. Ultimately, she helped set up transi-

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tional housing for them and other homeless families like them.

It's been an inspiration to me to get to know some of the kids she's helped and to realize they are the same as my own two children in terms of vulnerability, potential and joy. The big difference is that, after day care or nursery school, most of the children Gretchen works with go home to temporary housing, where there's minimal food, clothing and money. Gretchen has made me see that we need to recognize these children are no different from our own, and we need to pitch in and help. Too often, people look

away from suffering. But I think when you face the harsh, heart-breaking aspects of life, you gain strength to do something about it. I

want to give my own children a full picture of those living with poverty and loss, and inspire them to help others. It's the example that Gretchen lives.

A year or so ago I went to a graduation ceremony at one of Gretchen's preschools. I was so moved by the pride and joy the families showed in seeing their little ones honored. Some of the children in these programs have terminal illnesses, but the ceremonies are always about life's moments of joy.

I'm sure there have been times when I've looked in the rearview mirror too much, or gotten caught up in something that really didn't matter. Gretchen celebrates other people's ability to thrive. I wish there were more people like her.

As told to LAURA YORKE

Karennna Gore Schiff is the author of the just published *"Lighting the Way: Nine Women Who Changed Modern America."*

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