

# GRANDMA'S GIFTS

Emily Douglas is out to change the world

By Judy Hare Thorne, Angelos Editor, and Priscilla Childress Tillner, KD Connect Editor



Emily and volunteers package dental products for the Trick-or-Teeth program.

**W**hen 8-year-old Emily Douglas locked eyes with another girl in a rural Appalachian Ohio grocery store, she knew something wasn't right. Bundled in a coat against the cold November wind, Emily stared at the girl who was barefoot and wearing a T-shirt and shorts. Both families were shopping for Thanksgiving dinner — the Douglasses' meal would be traditional with all the trimmings; the other family would be eating bologna and bread.

**It was Emily's "aha" moment.** "I never realized that what I witnessed would completely change my life as well as millions of others," she says. Only two years after that grocery store encounter, Emily started the organization Grandma's Gifts to help needy children in Appalachia; she was just 10 years old.

How does a youngster create a non-



profit? "I didn't ask permission from my parents, because I had made up my mind that I wanted to change the world," she says, "but they helped me to define and clarify my dreams." At the outset they also covered administrative costs. "Someone has to buy stamps, paper and envelopes," she says, "and when you're 10 you don't have a bank account let alone the money to buy 100 stamps."

For her first project, Emily wrote letters asking for donations to buy Christmas presents and received enough money for gifts for three children in Appalachia. "I was hooked immediately and wanted to do more," she says. "It felt great to help kids who were my age or older as well as have strangers donate to my dream."

**Today Grandma's Gifts** provides food, clothes, toys and books to families and schools in the Appalachian Mountain region of Ohio, Kentucky and West Virginia; the area suffers from poverty and illiteracy. Assisting counties where poverty levels are between 13 and 45 percent, Emily has helped provide \$2.5 million in goods and services, as well as more than 650,000 books and 12,500 pounds of food. Donations now have surpassed



\$12.2 million with 100 percent going directly to Appalachia; all administrative and operating costs are covered by matching grants.

The success of Grandma's Gifts holds special meaning for Emily because her Grandmother Norma, who died in 1991 from cancer, grew up in poverty in Appalachia during the Depression. She told Emily stories of her childhood and taught her the importance of being grateful for what you have and to help others who have less. She is the inspiration behind all of Emily's efforts. "She will always be in my heart and by my side cheering me on," Emily says.

**An initiate of Gamma Nu-Miami/Ohio**, Emily, 27, has been recognized for her remarkable efforts. By the time she turned 18, she had brought the Grandma's Gift message to the White House for the Presidents' Summit for America's Future, served on Ohio boards on Appalachia and education, and received from President Bill Clinton the President's Service Award, the highest community service award for U.S. volunteers. She'd also testified before the Ohio General Assembly and the U.S. Congress about service-learning and education.

She appeared on "Oprah" as one of Oprah's Angels in 1998, and her young age, 16, attracted enough national media attention for her to expand her work into all 50 states. "I owe Oprah a giant hug and thank-you for being one of the building blocks that has made Grandma's Gifts what it is today," she says.

**In 2008 Emily was named** a L'Oréal Woman of Worth, one of 10 nationwide, and she was featured in the December issue of People magazine as one of the "People Heroes in Hard Times." The

magazine quoted an Ohio mother whose two sons participate in science workshops funded by Grandma's Gifts: "Everyone is having hard times, but Emily broadens the horizons for my kids. And she does it out of the goodness of her heart."

**Other Grandma's Gifts projects** include an annual Trick-or-Teeth fundraiser to send toothbrushes, toothpaste and dental hygiene information to needy families and a Spring Clean book drive to collect and redistribute books to establish libraries in battered-women's shelters, hospital pediatric wards, community centers and schools. There also are Thanksgiving food drives, scholarships to summer camps for gifted children and a science-by-mail program that pairs schools in remote Appalachia with a working scientist who acts as a role model and mentor to encourage careers in the sciences.

**For 2010, Emily plans** a Seeds for Success drive to give hungry people the ability to grow their own food. As well, she hopes to send baby chicks to families who will raise them for eggs and meat. "This program will not only help feed hungry people, but increase their self-sufficiency, self-worth and self-esteem," she says.

Emily believes that many of the lessons she learned in Kappa Delta are helping her as she moves forward in life. In addition to the meaning of true friendship, an important lesson is the betterment of women by mentoring and education. "I try to do this as much as possible with those who are involved with Grandma's Gifts," she says. "We always laugh that a strong woman is a dangerous thing.

"The older I get, the more I'm thankful I have had a supportive family and a close Kappa Delta-friend network encouraging me never to quit my activities."

**Emily's energy is boundless.** She recently earned a master's degree in human resources and an MBA from Ohio State. While going to school, she worked as a consultant on organizational strategy; an administrative associate for the OSU Office of Minority Affairs where she recruited other American Indians (Emily is Cherokee); a disc jockey at parties and events; a daily field hockey coach and mentor to more than 80 girls sixth through 12th grade; and a consultant/director of human resources in health care.

Today she works at Batelle for Kids, a Columbus, Ohio, nonprofit that uses a variety of strategic plans and research to improve schools. She's directing a project for Houston Independent School District and will soon start on one close to her heart in Appalachian Ohio.

With all that Emily Douglas has accomplished in her young life, she remains modest, grounded and humble. Thanks to the lessons from Grandma Norma, Emily is passionate about all that she wants to do to improve the lives of Appalachian children and families. If she has her way, fewer residents of Ohio, Kentucky and West Virginia will have to live in the poverty that marked her grandmother's childhood. 📞

Information: [www.grandmasgifts.org](http://www.grandmasgifts.org).

## Insights from Emily's Grandma Norma:

- Find something you love and do it to the best of your ability; whether you succeed or fail, in your heart you win.
- Realize every morning that you're lucky to be alive and to have even a toothbrush, a book and a warm blanket.
- "Being poor isn't a crime; it's just inconvenient."
- It's not how many shoes you own, the worth of your house, or the size of your bank account. It's how much love you create and maintain between your family and friends. They are your closest and most important assets.
- "We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give."
- The largest donation and the smallest donation are still important; do not forget where you came from.
- Helping others doesn't deserve awards and recognition; it's just something you're supposed to do.