

*I say, in this uncertain world, start at home. Start in your area of competence with things you can affect. Start with love- not abstract, heroic, frustrated love for planet, nation, the next generation, but rather love for the humble, anonymous, promising, rewarding glory of the beings amongst whom you live.*  
~Chase Collins

## Gabriela's Gift

By Liz Rog

It was seven days ago that I went to Gabriela's apartment and she cried as she told me that she would be evicted (a true translation of her words would be "removed by the police and put in the street") unless she paid rent by January 1st. I told her that night that I would ask my friends for money to help. I watched her as I spoke, and I wondered if she heard me; she looked half-invisible, sad, hopeless.

I have seen Gabriela three times since that night, and each time her light has shown more brightly, until tonight when we met at the Fareway parking lot in Decorah and I beheld her as radiant. She and Alison bounced out of the car in which they had been carried from Postville, approaching me with smiles and lightness.

After we all greeted each other, in a little awkward moment when I began to wonder about the nicest way to hand someone \$500 in a winter parking lot, she asked if I could show her the store where I work. Her question surprised and delighted me; how could she have known that it had been my heart's desire to present her with this gift at the co-op? I had wanted to meet there because the co-op is the place where so many good things have begun and, though the request for money had gone out not through the co-op but rather through my own email list, in fact 99% of the people who donated money are people who walk through and breathe that same air. Symbolism and ceremony are dear to me (my closest friends will be surprised I didn't have a candle lit and a song prepared!) and symbolically the co-op was the right place to present her with this small-but-large gift. I had dismissed it as a cumbersome and unimportant notion, and made this plan to meet at Fareway, our handy meeting place because she knows it well.

But here we stood in the busy Fareway parking lot, and she was asking to see our beloved co-op! I agreed to it, and we crammed into the backseat of a friend's car. It was Tuesday evening, just as those big flakes of snow started to fall. The town was bustling and beautiful. We were on an adventure, and there was a big gift waiting somewhere along the way. I suppose we were both anticipating the moment of the exchange, from our very different perspectives, and for me the knowing and waiting was something to savor.

We entered the foyer of the co-op, and from that very first step we began meeting people who had read the story about our trip to the emergency room. I couldn't know if they were aware that this was she, nor did I ask. But the smiles were big and full of love, and

the greetings were gentle and sincere. She spoke with Eunice, co-op cashier who in her previous job at Wal-Mart had been the only Spanish-speaking cashier and had translated for Gabriela many times. She met Charlie, Becky, Betsy, and many others.

I showed her around the store and gave her a quick overview about how our store is special: thousands of people own it together; we support local farmers; we sell organic and fair trade products (“precio justo”, or “just price”, in Spanish) that pay farmers fairly and don’t expose them to toxins, we provide ways for people to buy food without adding garbage to the landfill, and we treat our staff well. In the last few decades I have explained these important ideas countless times, but never before to someone with her indigenous, campesino, post-international trade agreement background; this moment was both humbling and refreshing. She comes from impoverished rural Guatemala and we have lived in a rich time and place, but these issues of food justice and sustainability are universal. For us these matters can be ignored at little short-term cost, but her people have literally gone hungry (and poisoned) as a result of unjust food policies. I allowed myself to fancy that she took some hope from hearing that there were places in the world where we cared about environmental and economic justice.

After the short tour we said good-bye to new friends in the co-op and stepped outside. On the sidewalk I handed Gabriela the envelope with money, and told her that also the bill at the optometrist had been paid so Alison’s glasses would be here in a week. She looked straight up at me and I could tell she was preparing to present a heart-felt thank you.

The warm yellow light from the deli dining area glowed on Gabriela and Alison’s faces, and gigantic snowflakes landed on their hats and coats and lashes. The streetlights and headlights made it all sparkle. With clarity and warmth, this glowing woman thanked me for the gift. I told her that it was money from 34 friends, and that I would surely thank them for her. She said, yes, please do that, and tell them that I am making Tamales and Ponche for New Years’ Eve and that they are all invited to our humble home to share this food and pass the New Year with us. And, she said, do you sometimes get together with these people? Because when you do, I would like to come and thank them myself. Thank them all from me and my family, and tell them that God will bless them for their kindness.

They got in the back of the car and off they went, back to Fareway to meet their ride home. The bustle of the evening came back into focus for me, and I began to see the other people and objects that had been obscured by the light of our exchange. They were changed. Another story had been added, and our co-op had been blessed by it all. And, of course, so had I, and so have you.

I wonder what she would have felt had I told her that 12 hours after people heard of her need, \$300 had been donated – and that 3 days later, \$1200 had come in, and that by today, only 7 days later, \$2500 has been donated... and that for each person who sent a check there were 10 more who would also be glad to do so, and 30 more who have given some other kind of assistance to people affected by the raid? How would the people of

the co-op feel if I told them that since I sent out that request, not once have I walked through the store but that someone has offered money for Gabriela? All of this money will be used well and soon, by the family of Gabriela and by others as well.

The co-op was indeed the perfect place in which to present this gift. There is a center here from which we are taking small steps toward becoming a Great Society – one that takes care of its neediest people, land, water, air, and other beings. Here (and anywhere) we get a peek at what can happen when people build relationships around meaningful ideas. This place is only one of many powerful centers in our community, centers and people that intertwine more with each passing year, creating a network for love in action.

We can be a mighty force. What will we do next? Giving money, bringing over some long underwear, driving undocumented workers to appointments, asking for humane immigration laws...it all makes a difference to the immigrants, to be sure. But these actions – random, spontaneous, and uneven as they may be – also provide us with something that we intensely need: to practice working together to transform our world.