

More than a change of clothes...a pile of hope.

Interview for Project Elf by Kristin Estes

I dropped by to interview Mickey Mikeworth at the Parents in Community Action (PICA) classroom to talk to her about her infamous closets. Yes, you read that right, closets! The closets *and* Mickey are stuff of legend if you are homeless and trying to build a new life.

Mickey Mikeworth is a two time winner of the Top Women in Finance award and the brain behind the community initiative called Project Elf, a volunteer based enterprise that helps families transitioning out of homeless shelters.

A Christmas Eve event is how Project Elf got its name. Mickey decided to put her ideas about resource sharing to work and invited individuals to become an Elf, helping her create a gigantic event that is a like an episode of extreme house makeover.

On Christmas Eve, a horde of Elf volunteers fill the nearly empty house of someone who has recently moved out of a homeless shelter with furniture, fully furnished beds, and closets of clothes and kitchen supplies, transforming a humble rental in a rundown neighborhood into a fantastic fresh start. The Elves disappear at 3pm, performing all of this magic while the families are out at the mall. Parents are in on the plan, but have no idea how the whole experience will be life changing.

The first thing you notice about Mickey is her intense boundless energy. It is impossible to be in a room with her and not feel hopeful. She is a bold personality with eyes so big they look like storybook art.

Mickey teaches financial education twice a month at the shelter and is deeply committed to her message, delivering content in a highly animated performance



that is both profound and humorous. Her class title today was “How to dig yourself out of poverty with a pen and paper.”

Mickey showcases fresh ways to look at old problems. It was so enthralling I wanted to pack her up in my bag and bring her to meet all my best friends.



There are six women saddled up to a table in a reinvented home economics classroom that used to belong to Regina High School. Everyone is taking notes, swapping smiles and enjoying a healthy lunch. A happy scene on the surface, but you can see the stress on the women’s faces with a stare that shows the tiredness of having too much to do every day. As soon as class is over the big moment will arrive. The closets will open.

The closets do not look like much from the outside; they are simply three classroom closets with chains and teensy little locks. The locks are absolutely laughable because they are so inappropriate to preventing theft.

Class wraps up and Mickey looks at each person in the group like a girlfriend sharing a secret and whispers to the table.

“Should we open the closets?”

The whisper stuns us all. Our heads nod in readiness. The homeless women literally have no idea what is behind closet door #3 and neither do I.

Mickey’s voice stops the group in mid stride as they move towards the closets, “Oh, I forgot to tell you the rule! The only rule for the closet is that there are NO rules. If there is something in the closet that is for you, take it. Our closet does not EVER run out. When you are shopping today my advice is to be generous to yourselves. It’s your reward for building a better life.”

The closets are unlocked and opened wide and I have to take it all in. Boxes, toilet paper, shoes, baby clothes, and heaps of everything are piled into a space that is too small. Like a movie with an abrupt beginning, I am hooked watching the scene

unfold. I am glued in place watching as these women try on a lot more than just clothes in this closet.



The middle of the closet is a throng of hangers smashed tight with clothes. A single shelf running across the top is stuffed with personal care items, and across the bottom is an assortment of odd bins stacked in every manner. Each woman chooses a space on the counter or the tables to build a pile. The room is alive with the happy twitter of the little things they are finding and the joy of helping each other find sizes and treasures. Shopping is just 40 minutes.

The women look like friends, but in reality they are people who happen to be homeless at the same time. Most have never exchanged a word before this session but they have seen each other in passing. The rule is to “keep to yourself” in the shelter because there can be some really bad people there. Those rules seem to have faded now that the closets are open.

Full size items like toothpaste, diapers, new socks & undergarments, paper cups, make-up, and notebooks make their way to all the piles. Like a musical chime that keeps ringing each person finds the special items they have been needing and announces it to the group like a archaeological dig find; a nail clippers, a bag of goodies for a birthday party, jewelry, holiday dresses, leather boots, perfume, thermal lunch bag, Kleenex, and a wallet are a few of today’s prized items. The piles are enormous and these women are now somehow friend-ish.



Toni the PICA Advocate calls the bus driver to come to the classroom to help the women carry the *bags and bags* of goodies they have found for themselves.

I have just witnessed six women bag a pile of hope. I can see how it makes a difference for someone in great need. I did not know it would make a difference to me as an onlooker.

I have officially decided the rumors were right - but not right *enough*. I have determined that the magic of the closet is not in the contents but it is *how* people interact with it. Watching it all unfold is akin to being magically transported to a fairy godmother's closet.

I am officially swooning, and stating that it was a near magical experience to watch six women be totally overjoyed...to forget poverty even for a moment.

What a magical gift to give back a simple joy of shopping to someone in dire need of everything. Everything these women put into bags was quality stuff. There was no competition or squabbles for stuff, just the camaraderie of helping each other find their perfect things hidden in a bin. There is no bill, there are no rules, and the closet never runs out. How can this NOT be a fairy godmother closet?

So is it the stuff of legend? The closets had indeed lived up to their reputation.

After what I just experienced I had to know "what just happened?"

I asked Mickey, "How do you explain this scenario to people?"

She replied, "Pretty cool isn't it? There is no easy way to explain it. Just tell your own truth and I will never have to explain it. The women that came to class know what happened. That's all that matters."

How do you explain this scenario to people?

(Mickey and the Advocate Toni bust out laughing.)

MM: Pretty cool isn't it? There is no easy way to explain it. Just tell your own truth and I will never have to explain it. The women that came to class know what happened. That's all that matters.

How many families does Project Secure serve?

MM: It is more important to talk about how many they **cannot** reach. Each day the bus leaves behind 250 children who are eligible for services because there are actually only 28 slots in the city available for these families in specifically homeless-served pre-school.

The homeless population in MN has grown by 300% over the last 36 months. We have a serious epidemic and many issues with homelessness are often overlooked. Project Secure serves three shelters. The services and the rules of poverty that are available right now leave 90% behind.

What do those kids do all day?

MM: That is a sad issue. Children have to be entertained by their parents while their parents are trying to do everything. Parent's cognitive thinking skills are depleted because they are in overload. They are trying to get by. It's hard to be an awesome parent when you are stressed to the limit.

My small way of helping is to offer tools. I ask people to donate backpacks stuffed with small toys, books, clean socks, and water bottles. That way kids have things to keep their hands busy while parents are on the bus or waiting in lines. There is a lot of waiting when you are broke and dragging your kids to every appointment. Everyone needs something to make them smile.

How are Project Secure and Project Elf connected? I was once a welfare-to-work mom who grew up to become a financial advisor. One of my college mentors asked me to start teaching my methods to other women so they could work



themselves out of poverty. She got me started teaching financial education to the homeless and I have been here for 12 years. I saw ways that would help these families grow. I chose to go with the reality and serve fewer people in a bigger way.

What does that mean- help fewer in a bigger way?

Families in strife need a community to support them as they find their own path. They do not need a random handout but they do need consistent support. A group of people who are independently willing to put energy into the bigger problem really do create lasting change.

Of the women who came to class today, 60% will stay in the homeless shelter for the next nine months. The Advocate will learn as much as they can about the person and put together a plan. The Advocate is really the key to getting movement through the system. My role is to provide a life line to what the world looks like after poverty.

I teach the concept that getting through poverty alive is about resource management. By rearranging resources in a defined way everyone can have more of what they need.

I take the Advocate's plan information back to my community and see if anyone has extra resources to share. In this case I ask my friends to round up what they have too much of and drop it off at my office and I will connect it to people who need that resource.

The women you saw today LOVE the gifts they found in the closets and it made them feel special. It is equally a reward to those who give to see their items being appreciated. There is joy in gifting and both sides heal from the experience.

How does sending things to the closet heal someone?

MM: Here is the part that makes me sound a little weird, BUT here is my best explanation; I think there is a larger and more human message in the exchanges that happen at this little closet. I believe there is energy in the gifts people give.

Those that give with true loving intention and not just for a tax write off incentive actually find a peace when it goes to the right place. Donors place love IN the gifts that they send to the closet and actually only look for the BEST to gift because the reward is having given the BEST. Our little closet is not a drop off site for extra junk. It is a place to give something much bigger.

Those who come to the closets can have as much as they need and THAT is not a message you get anywhere when you are in poverty. We never run out of people who have something special to share. Just a few items of quality make a big difference.

Here is an example of something that you witnessed today: Let's review the brown pants that still had the tags on them. Those pants were hanging in my friend Amy's closet. They were hanging in purgatory until a day when she was going to be thinner. She stared at them for a year and was no thinner. Now they are going to be loved by another person who rarely gets NEW pants. Sending those pants to the closet literally freed Amy who has been staring at them every day, reminding her she is NOT thinner.

That exchange healed all people attached to the exchange. Maybe Amy will stop punishing her body for being the wrong size. I will send her a picture of who is actually enjoying those pants.

Tell us about your classes?

MM: All of my classes start with the same lesson; Money only has one purpose- it buys you choice.

The closets were created to reward parents who make the effort to attend classes: since these mothers were committed to learning more - I found a way to commit to giving more.

You have a really fun view on donations, tell us about it:

MM: It's fun to get a **hand-me-UP**. I am totally hooked on the WOW factor of making someone's day. Life in a homeless shelter is exhausting and literally soul killing. Never underestimate how awful it is to share a bed with five kids in one room eating food out of a can for months on end. It is miserable.

Something as simple as a cute bracelet, a charming skirt you know your daughter would go crazy for, or fluffy towels can give someone a perk.

I started the closets by asking my friends to share their cutest stuff and allow me to give to someone that would LOVE it just as much as they did. Someone who totally needed a perk in life but has very few bonus moments.

How much stuff in your closet would you trade in right now to make someone not feel like a total failure? Because they are that low, and something as simple as fresh socks and a new coat can make that person *feel* different and that is the first step in being different.

I saw many new items, where do those come from?

MM: Clearance shoppers are amazing!

I invite those who shop with *skills* to pick a dollar amount every month and clearance shop on behalf of the closet. So here is your personal invitation, when you see items on deep clearance buy them and send it over to our families.

After the holidays so many things are 70-90% off and that is when we need volunteers to rally their carts.

Do volunteers ever send in garage sale items?

MM: LOVE garage sale season! I tell people to pick their own budget of gifting and start shopping. We have some garage sale favorites: small toys, dark skinned Barbie dolls, Barbie clothes, school supplies, party supplies, jewelry, toy cars, hair accessories, and travel games. The rule of thumb is "if it adorable- you should grab it!"

Tell us about the role of the Advocate:

MM: None of these families could transition through all the chaos without a great Advocate. Poverty interfacing with non-profits is like a video game created by someone on psychedelics. If you try to apply reality you will go crazy. Many of these families will need to interact with as many as twenty-five different non-profits to get some of the basic resources they need to move out of the shelter.

Most non-profits or churches just fill one need and each place has a set of forms that cannot be filled out online or in advance. So one place has a bus card, one has laundry coupons, and one has diapers. You can only gather a little at one time. It is maddening to try to gather resources. That's why the closets here are such a BIG deal.

In 12 years we have had exactly two Advocates and both had a personal mission. Barbara retired at age 72. Currently we have Toni who is delightful and is not allowed to retire anytime soon. She is a paid employee from Head Start who goes out and finds these parents and helps them figure out all the doors they need to open.

I see myself as a tool for the Advocate.

How long will you do this work?

MM: I will retire in 10 years and we will see what happens then. But for now I am in for the next decade, and who knows, I may need a bigger closet.

What types of donations do you take?

We have really limited space in the closets so we have to stay organized. We don't take anything large. Families that are in transition NEED everything but may not have the space to put it.

IKEA blue bags are our #1 need because they are huge and durable and can organize a family. Transportation is a struggle, so bus cards are freedom and an escape from the one room they have at the Drake. Gifts that make moms feel better about themselves such as cute clothes, handbags, and dark skinned make-up. Every mom wants their kids to be clean and cute, so clothes that are brand names with very little wear make a homeless mom feel like she can provide for

her family. It turns some of the volume of guilty language in their head down a notch.

Most of the things the families need are about living in a shelter and the rules about the shelter. If you are living in a shelter you are only allowed three diapers a day and three baby wipes, three feminine products a day for five days, and one travel bar of soap per family per week. There is no food available outside of meal time, there is one fridge and it is closed at night so you have nowhere to store breast milk. You're allowed one paper cup per family per day to drink out of the drinking fountain, one bed and one pillow per room and one blanket per bed.

Items I would love groups to gather are things like: new underwear and socks in every size, nap blankets, back packs, full size soap, kids slippers, PJ's, mouthwash, cleaning supplies, air freshener, trash bags, sponges, tampons, tape, scissors, markers, diapers, pull ups, coloring books, thermal lunch totes and ice packs, pillow cases, towels, washrags, Ziploc bags, baby supplies, laundry soap, dryer sheets, medium size notebooks, quarters for laundry, and cute hair supplies.

What's the best story you have helped create?

MM: I let people create their own story. It is awe-inspiring to give in a BIG way even if you happen to have a small part. I also know that many small things add up to BIG changes. I add my skills as a planner to take a BIG problem and split it into many small parts so that many people can each solve one little part.

Items can be dropped off at Mickey's office

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