

# 'You are the gift'

**Imagine if everyone had the mind-set that one act of kindness begets another**

BY ELIZABETH LELAND, Staff Writer

A man who rescued Amy Sturkey on the highway would take nothing in return, so Amy is paying her good fortune forward -- all the way to Cambodia and a monk she met while watching for the moon to rise over a 12th-century temple.

Sturkey, 44, a physical therapist in Charlotte, had never heard of "pay it forward" until after her wreck on Interstate 95 the Sunday after Thanksgiving. A tractor-trailer sideswiped her Honda, and her car spun into a bridge and came to a stop facing in the wrong direction. The truck sped off. Amy was in Georgia, four hours from home, traffic was heavy, and it was raining.



## **David Wolff.**



He was a few cars back and saw the wreck. He helped Amy get her car off the road, helped contact her insurance agent. He brought her a bottle of water and one for the police officer. He took GPS coordinates and photographs. He checked the engine to see whether her car would drive.

All the while Wolff's wife and two young boys waited in their car. They were returning to High Point from Thanksgiving vacation. They waited 45 minutes until Amy got back on the road and followed her a few miles to make sure her car would make it. When Amy got home to Charlotte, Wolff telephoned to check on her.

She figured he wouldn't accept a gift. But she asked whether he would accept a gift certificate for his children so that they could see the circle of good things coming around.

"Dear Amy," he said by e-mail. "When such events occur, God places me in the thick of it, because I undo situations and create solutions. I never ask anything and never can accept gifts because all I ask is that you pass this on to two people and tell them the same thing. You are the gift and I thank you for the opportunity to help you. Without you I could not be a channel for such help. Your e-mail of appreciation is more than enough, and it is so important to pay forward anything we feel we owe."

## Pay forward?

Sturkey asked around. You don't have to pay back someone who does a good deed, she learned. You can do something nice for someone else instead. The pay it forward social movement began in 2000 with Catherine Ryan Hyde's novel, "Pay It Forward." A 12-year-old boy in the book is motivated by a school assignment to do acts of kindness for three strangers. He asks the strangers to do the same. Oprah Winfrey helped popularize the idea in 2006 by giving 300 members of her audience \$1,000 and a camcorder to record their good deeds.

"I wanted to do something more than let someone into traffic in front of me or pick up something that someone had dropped," Amy said. "I wanted to do something extraordinary like David had."

In the monk, Sturkey found her opportunity.

## Oggipi the monk

She had met the monk in February 2008 while vacationing in Cambodia. He was sitting cross-legged in saffron robes at the edge of the water as the sun was about to set over the famous Angkor Wat temple.

Do you speak English? Sturkey asked. He said he did, and she asked whether he knew when the moon would rise. After chatting briefly, he invited her to visit him at his pagoda the next day. He would show her around, introduce her to his teacher and tell her about Buddha.

His name, he said, was Toem Channa.

Sturkey and her boyfriend, Guy Bryant, went to see him the next day. The monk, who is 23, had no mattress in his room and the roof leaked. Sturkey said he told them his parents had died of disease when he was young. He meditates twice a day on how to relieve suffering in the world. He teaches classes on moral values to 10-year-old children in a school. He studies English.



He wished, he said, that he could study at the university so he could get a job, but he didn't have the money.

"It just bugged me thinking of him wanting to go to college but he couldn't," Sturkey said. "I cannot tell you why, but it was almost like the universe was not going to let me forget that boy."



## C helping hand

Nine months later, after the wreck, and after Sturkey learned about the pay it forward idea, she set about helping Toem Channa.

She learned it would cost \$630 a year to send him to college, including tuition, books and \$1-a-day to rent a moped to get to school. She wired the money, and Toem Channa is now taking classes in basic computer, English, Khmer studies, economics and public administration. He told Sturkey he hopes to become a tour guide.



"Amy," he e-mailed in broken and misspelled English. "...I did never meet the kind person like you before. i thought that this is a my vast luck, have been meeting you.... i would like to exprees my gratitude to you so much. i am really happy, you have help me

"May the four blessing of the Buddha's longlife, colour, healthy and strength to be with you all the direction."

Sturkey, in return, thanked him for helping her find a way to do something good in the world.

"You," she wrote, "are the gift."

She doesn't know if he understands. "But," Sturkey said, "I certainly do."

### An obligation to help

A monk in Cambodia is going to college because of a chance encounter between two strangers on the side of an interstate in Georgia.

David Wolff said a Hindu teacher taught him to "Help ever, hurt never." He keeps his SUV stocked with water, food, a first-aid kit, a rope and a float.

"When there's someone out there in need," he said, "it is an obligation to help them. If everyone had that mind-set, this would be a much nicer world."

Wolff, who is 48 and works in real estate, points out that it took only 45 minutes out of his day to help Sturkey. "For 45 minutes of your time," he said, "you change a life significantly or allay someone from going through a lot of pain."

He predicts that one day a monk in Cambodia will pay it forward.