

Spirit Wings Kids, Inc.

Donna Johnson: Reaching Up by Reaching Out

By Josephine Gross, Ph.D.



A former athlete and swimming coach, Donna Johnson has been a full-time network marketing leader for thirty-two years. She has been a top earner in her company for the past twenty-two years and has a vibrantly active organization that spans several countries.

Donna is passionate about helping others create what she calls 3-D success: 1) making a difference in the world; 2) creating a balanced life; 3) enjoying financial peace.

To fulfill the "making a difference" part of her vision, she created Spirit Wings Kids, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to transforming and empowering children and their families through education, financial assistance, resources, referrals and role modeling for living a life of contribution.

"The foundation offers help in several different ways," says Donna, "because although money may be necessary to help families through times of crisis, it usually plays only a limited role. Our company president, Rita Davenport, loves to say, 'If money can fix it, it isn't a problem.' Life's real problems require much more than just financial assistance; they require a focus on things like character, behavior and mindset."

SpiritWings.com includes a Tot Spot, Kids Korner, Teen Scene, Young Adult Studio and Empowered Families department, offering ongoing resources and opportunities for everyone to give and receive, and pay it forward on a global scale.

The Freedom to Give



Donna playing with the children in India..

When Donna joined her current network marketing company over two decades ago, she had already been in the business for ten years and was discovering the true freedom that comes with being an independent business owner.

"I absolutely love having a free life," she says. "I love working when I want to—even working hard—but I don't like structure: I don't like bosses, alarm clocks or cubicles. If I want to make my calls outside by the pool, I want to be able to do that."



Donna buying a girl new shoes.

Since Donna's love of freedom was the driving force behind her business, when it came time to baptize her new organization, she chose the name Spirit Wings.

"The name goes back to a song by Joni Eareckson Tada," Donna explains. "Joni had an amazing story: she was an athlete who had a diving accident that made her quadriplegic. She became an artist, using a paint brush with her teeth, and a singer. She wrote a beautiful song that goes, 'Spirit wings, soar above all the earth-bound things...'. The song resonated with me and that's how Spirit Wings was born. Our symbol is the eagle, which represents the freedom to fly."



Sharing a meal at the Indian orphanage.

In 2008, Donna decided to take Spirit Wings a step further and created the Spirit Wings Kids Charity.

"There are two parts to Spirit Wings Kids," says Donna. "The first part came out of a very personal and trying family experience. Six years ago, my stepdaughter Emily was diagnosed with a life-threatening eating disorder. Costly treatments seemed to be her only hope for recovery."



Enjoying a treat with the children.

"We spent several years and over half a million dollars trying to find the right treatment—none of it covered by insurance. What struck me was that had I not had the financial resources to be able to participate in the costs, she might not be alive today. This inspired me to start a foundation for families in need."

Donna had always been a giver who believed in tithing, but this experience fueled her desire to create a nonprofit organization to support children.



Donna with her children and grandchild.

Spirit Wings Kids, however, is not only for people who seek funding.

"Everybody who has applied for funding has received it," says Donna, "and we've been excited about that. But we are also a resource for help besides financial support. In our process with Emily, we discovered that her treatment helped to a point, but it was only part of her recovery. In fact, the defining piece to the healing process was learning to live a life of independence and contribution. When the mind shifts its focus to serving and caring for others with compassion and generosity, healing

naturally occurs!

"Emily kept being released from treatment centers that could not help her, the last one of which charged \$2,200 a day. I finally reached out to my friend Mark Fournier, because of his expertise in empowering children, teens and families in difficulty. Mark stepped in and a few weeks later he had Emily turned around, just by working through some self-esteem issues and basic life skills that traditional treatments didn't address.

"We learned that awareness is a big part of any recovery process, so we decided to provide resources for people to grow their understanding of family dynamics, in addition to simply providing funding."

Team Involvement

The second part of the Spirit Wings Kids Foundation is its global outreach program.

"At first the people who applied for funding were all in the United States," says Donna, "mainly families with children who had health issues and needed support. But I always wanted to do something on a global scale. I also believe that when someone receives funding and help, one of the best ways for them to continue to heal is to pay it forward. I wanted to create some kind of dynamic to the Spirit Wings Kids Foundation that would allow everyone to give on an ongoing basis."

In her search to make this happen, Donna was introduced to Streams of Mercy, an organization devoted to loving and supporting the orphans of the world.

"Together with my network marketing organization, we are funding several orphanages around the world right now," she says. "At all our trainings, we talk about the needs of the orphanages and how we can support them.

"For instance, at our Green Bay leadership retreat in August, I shared my story about the orphanages I visited in India and showed video clips of my trip. I then told my group, 'This is not a heavy solicitation; I just would like you to think about participating. My goal for this retreat is to have ten people pledge \$75 a month. Seven hundred fifty dollars a month supports an entire orphanage, and I've already picked one out in Africa.'

"And for every orphanage we support through donations from our trainings," she adds, "I match the \$750 so we can actually fund two orphanages."

Sure enough, at the Green Bay event, ten people signed up for \$75 a month. They can further participate by going online to watch the progress, and they can even go to Africa and visit the orphanage. Donna will be going there in May 2010 with her twin teenage daughters.

With the matched funds from the Green Bay event, she will be supporting an additional orphanage, in Jamaica.

"I've always had a passion for the Jamaican people," says Donna. "I've had great opportunities to help them, including sponsoring a little boy there when he was nine. Now, he's twenty-seven and he helps us run Bananas Garden, our Eco Bed and Breakfast in Negril. I'm very excited to be able to support an orphanage on the island."

Trip to India

Donna went to India in March because she wanted an opportunity to visit some of the orphanages she had been funding. The Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire* showed the world the corruption that goes on there, and she wanted to see the situation firsthand. Fortunately, Streams of Mercy not only supports orphanages that are doing things right, it also helps expose those that are corrupt.

"Being in India was life-changing," says Donna. "It was definitely an assault on the senses. There are tons of people everywhere and you can barely see the sun because of the pollution. The noise level was mind-blowing, with horns honking at all hours of the night. I came back with a new appreciation for the blessings in our country."

One of the most significant events during her trip occurred because Donna traveled with a suitcase her twins had used the previous Christmas. Halfway through her trip, she reached into a side pocket and pulled out a Christmas card her girls had received. There was \$140 cash inside they had forgotten about.

"I remember scrounging for pennies in my house when the ice cream man would come around" says Donna, "and here my girls get \$140 and don't even remember it."

Donna's first thought was to email her daughters and tell them she found their money. But then she thought, "Wait a minute, this is a gift from God. I really wanted them here with me, but they couldn't come. However, now I have their money."

Instead of sending the money back, Donna decided to put it to work and made a little video clip showing how far \$140 went in India. It was amazing to see.

"It was an eye-opener for my girls," she says, "because they can spend that amount on a pair of jeans. After seeing just how far that money went in India, they became so much more careful with their finances. Now they are talking about what they can do to help children in need. They ask me, 'Mom, if we got this dress on sale, what could we do to help someone?'"

"I believe my video clip has also inspired people who are struggling financially and think, 'Gosh, I can't fund an orphanage.' It shows that even a little bit goes far for these orphanages around the world. In the U.S. we have a hard time understanding that.

"On the video I explain how we reach out so our blessings can come to us. They then flow through us and we reach out again to give back to others. It could be through encouragement, coaching or helping someone succeed; it also could be through volunteering and financial giving. We can give back in so many ways."

The Spirit of Giving

Donna believes the best way to teach giving is by example. In her talks, she also uses the image of an open hand.

"If you visualize an outstretched hand," she says, "you've got five fingers pointing out to other people. When people feel stressed or financially impaired, they start to close down and pull in. If you close your hand into a fist, all five fingers are pointing back at you, and you are now cut off from the flow of giving and receiving.

"The blessings we receive aren't ours, they're ours to share. There's no U-Haul at the end of a hearse. If we share our blessings with others, they multiply five- or ten-fold."

Donna's goal is to grow awareness around Spirit Wings Kids and help people realize the many ways they can give in addition to financial contributions. She wants to expose people to what goes on in the orphanages and expand her global support.

"I plan to take a trip every year, like my trips to India this year and to Africa next year. I want to be able to take my children and grandchildren and show them another side of reality, because we live in a very materialistic society. I want them to see a simpler way to live.

"Many of us today are making some assessments, changing purchasing behaviors and becoming more accountable for how we've lived. It's too easy to blame the banks for creating loans that people perhaps had no business taking out in the first place. The problem is not just with the bank approving a \$500,000 loan when you can only afford a \$300,000 home. This is about personal accountability as well, and the responsibility of living within your means.

"When you're prudent with your finances and live within your means, you can give more. When I started earning six figures a month, I waited a very long time before I purchased my current home in Arizona. My home in Wisconsin is a simple log cabin on a lake. I usually have a little retreat there after my events for my leaders, and when they walk in, they say, 'Oh my, you're a real person!' This is a simple, comfy home—nothing palatial.

"I have raised children who have taken to the philosophy of voluntary simplicity. For instance, my son heads up TheDraw.org, a regenerative land based community that teaches sustainable living and permaculture design. People admire me for my business accomplishments, but to see my accomplishments in my children is my greatest source of pride—to know that they are doing amazing things in this world and leaving a legacy that will continue for generations."

STRAIGHT TALK

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