

Charity learned at home

By IAN GILLESPIE, FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

I'm talking to 86-year-old Dorothy Parnell, trying to get a handle on her philosophy of helping others.

I'm asking her about raising kids and raising money. I'm asking why in the world we should give a half-baked hoot about unfortunate strangers with terrible problems on the far side of the world.

I'm asking why she takes so much joy from giving.

And finally, Parnell gives a wry little laugh.

"You throw your bread in the water," she says, "and sometimes you get back a ham sandwich."

I like that.

Parnell is one of about 20 elderly volunteers who got together last Saturday, on a day so hot you could've fried eggs on the roof. The group, who are residents at the north London retirement residence, Masonville Manor, got up at 6 a.m. to organize the items they'd priced for their yard sale. They bustled around, selling hotdogs and hamburgers and some of them didn't stop -- and as Parnell points out, "Some aren't in too good shape" -- until late afternoon, when they counted all the money.

In the end, they raised \$5,100 for Help Lesotho, an Ottawa-based charity that's helping to heal the hurting in the south African nation, a place that has the world's third-highest incidence of HIV/AIDS.

Yesterday, the manor volunteers presented their donation to Parnell's daughter, Peg Herbert. Born and raised in London, Herbert is founder and executive director of Help Lesotho, which has helped more than 6,000 children in Lesotho with sponsorships, education, counselling, medical testing and more.

Herbert first heard about the circumstances in Lesotho from an African student she was teaching at the University of Ottawa's faculty of education.

I think it's fair to say that most of us would've listened to the tale and left it at that. But Herbert decided to visit Lesotho. And not almost six years after that first visit, she heads a group that has raised more than \$1 million and gained the support of Canada's former UN ambassador, Stephen Lewis.

Parnell is proud of what her daughter has done.

But really, it's no surprise.

Parnell says she and her late husband, Doug, always tried to teach their kids to appreciate what they had and understand that others weren't so fortunate.

"The children were brought up to feel that there was a big need out there," says Parnell.

There were six kids (two have since passed away) in the Parnell household. And every day, they got the message.

"I think we tried to bring up the children to feel that there was no free lunch," says Parnell, who turns 87 in two weeks. "If they wanted a bicycle, they raised half. If they went to camp, they had to raise a portion of it."

"We always had a list on the refrigerator of duties that they had to do around the house, for which they got a very small allowance," she says. "And if they wanted more money, they could do more work."

I tell Parnell that a lot of people think they're too busy to volunteer.

"It's the busy person that has the time," she says. "If you have the interest, you'll do something."

I tell her that a lot of people likely think the world's problems are too complex for one person to change.

"It's just remarkable what one person can do," she says.

I tell her that a lot of people just can't be bothered to help anyone but themselves. And in response, Parnell says this:

"At breakfast a couple of days ago, there were two very grumpy men sitting at the next table by themselves," she recalls. "And heard one say to the other, 'I don't agree with all this stuff about Lesotho. Who ever heard of the place, anyway?' And the other said, 'I agree with you -- at my age in life, I'm looking after me.'

"And I thought, 'Those are the two most unpopular people in here. They give nothing, they're sour, they're complaining all the time and they're going to get nothing back.' "

Then Parnell tells me about throwing bread in water and pulling out something better. Like a ham sandwich.

Or maybe a life well-lived.