



Ted Schurter/The State Journal-Register

Tonya Voepel of Sherman, right, and her sister-in-law from Colorado, Karen Voepel, prepare gifts to distribute to families in New Orleans through their Share the Spirit charitable organization.

the Spirit of giving

The
adventures
of two women
helping
the needy

By PENNY ZIMMERMAN-WILLS
CORRESPONDENT

A local Sherman woman is demonstrating the power of one. A trip to Kentucky as a teenager to help her aunt deliver clothes to the needy sparked a desire to help others. Since then, she has combined that passion with an enthusiasm for physical challenges.

Together with her sister-in-law from Colorado, Tonya Voepel has hiked the Grand Canyon, walked the Colorado Trail and backpacked in the high country of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to generate funds for different causes.

Their efforts have raised \$15,000 to date, which has helped buy shoes for local schoolchildren, provide food and clothes for individual families and, most recently, help five families devastated by Hurricane Katrina rebuild their lives.

Voepel, 44, is vice president of Share the Spirit Foundation Inc., a not-for-profit organization that she co-founded in 2003 with her

sister-in-law, Karen Voepel, 54, of Colorado, who serves as president.

The two women traveled to New Orleans in September to help a woman named Estelle Smith, who lived with her niece, Elvie Johnson, and her niece's son in a Federal Emergency Management Agency trailer following the Hurricane Katrina disaster. Tonya Voepel helped Smith, who is in her 70s, make the trailer a home by donating items for a fully furnished kitchen. Besides providing Smith with a refrigerator, stove, microwave, pots, pans and silverware, the group also attended a dedication ceremony for the home. They met with her pastor and many of the volunteers who helped put the finishing touches on her remodeled home.

"Hurricane Katrina may have happened over a year ago, but thousands continue to be devastated by its effects," Voepel says.

The two women met Smith through a friend of Karen Voepel's, who is a resident of St. Bernard Parish. That initial contact led to meetings with four other families devastated by the storm, including Sylvia Harbin. They replaced appliances, pots and pans and more in Harbin's kitchen.

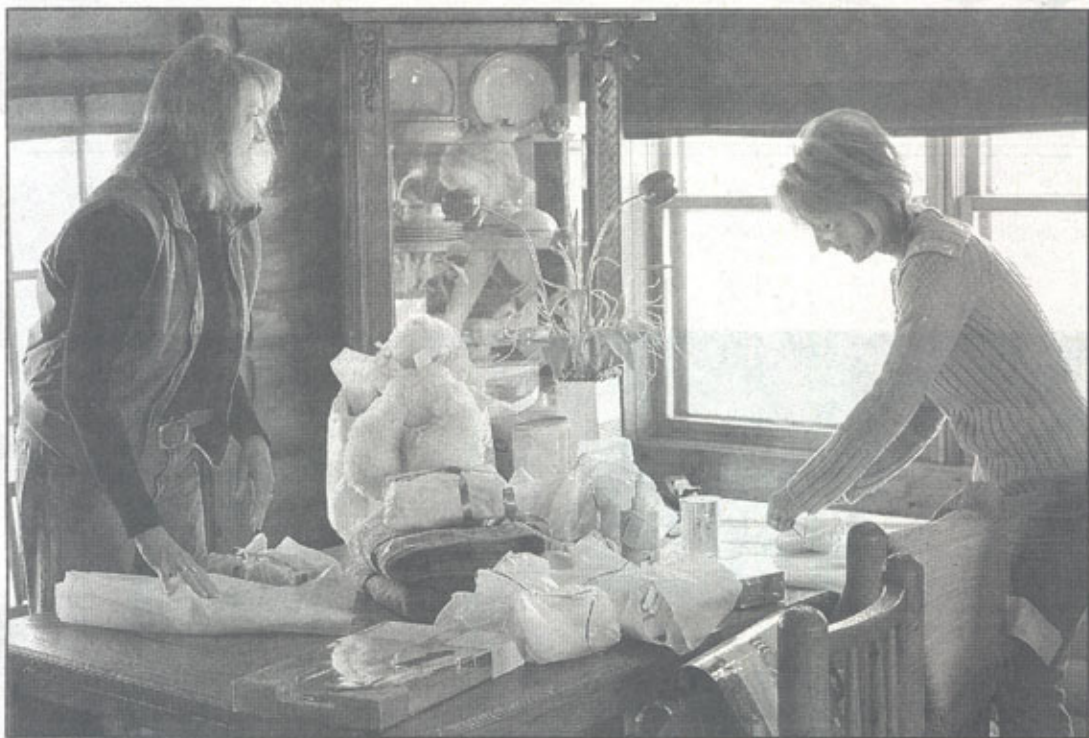
While visiting Harbin's neighborhood to see the progress being made on her home, "we were shocked to see the entire neighborhood filled with FEMA trailers," Tonya Voepel says, "and to witness the slow progress being made by those single-handedly trying to rebuild their homes.

"The amount of devastation is unreal, and until you visit the area, it's hard to understand," she says. "Most people we talked to just wanted to share their stories with someone. Entire neighborhoods have been wiped out."

Helping Katrina victims is just the latest volunteer effort Tonya and Karen Voepel have undertaken. In 2002, during a three-day walk from

Share the Spirit

For more information on Share the Spirit Foundation and how you can help, contact Tonya Voepel, 9865 State Route 124, P.O. Box 78, Sherman, IL 62684, at 512-2603 or tvoepel@vps-il.com or Karen Voepel, P.O. Box 1510, Lamar, CO 81052, (719) 336-9657 or karen@cmnet.net. Visit Spirit Foundation's Web site at sharethespirit.info.



Ted Schurter/The State Journal-Register

"You can help in the smallest of ways. Just seeing the looks on the people's faces — they are always so thankful," says Tonya Voepel of Sherman, right. Tonya and her sister-in-law, Karen, co-founded the Share the Spirit Foundation in 2003.

SPIRIT

■ From page 17

Boulder to Denver to raise money and awareness for breast cancer, the two women raised more than \$5,000. They were hooked, and the idea for Share the Spirit was born.

"With the motivation and spirit we received from completing the event, we decided to start a foundation to help share the burden of others in need," says Tonya Voepel, who owns a graphic design business based in Springfield. "It was our way of challenging ourselves."

The organization was formed the following year. Their first project was providing shoes to children in need. In coordination with schools and social service agencies in Colorado and Illinois, the women raised money to give away shoes to area children, and also paid for hiking boots and scheduled outdoor camps for kids who would not otherwise have the opportunity.

The initial shoe drive was held at Payless Shoes in Litchfield in October of 2005.

"It was a very kind thing to do," says Aaron Hopper, principal of Farmersville and Raymond grade schools in the Panhandle School District. "You don't often see someone trying to help others when their name isn't even mentioned."

In fact, Hopper says he wasn't sure who the founders of the foundation were — but he did know the event helped area children from Montgomery and Christian counties. The children selected to receive the tennis shoes, boots and school shoes from the foundation were chosen for a variety of reasons, he said, based on need. The school's social worker

facilitated contact with the families.

The shoe drives buy new shoes for deserving students at the beginning of each school year. In December 2005, they also coordinated with U.S. Army soldiers stationed in Iraq to distribute shoes to a local school in that region.

The foundation continues to receive donations from people who sponsor the two women's physical-challenging excursions; the money raised is then donated to various causes.

Not all fundraising efforts send the women on an outdoors excursion. Last spring, one Share the Spirit event included a dinner party held in Chicago. Called *Bella Sera*, it featured authentic Italian food hosted by their friend and Italian food expert Tony Yannoni.

Tonya and Karen Voepel keep in touch with their friends in New Orleans. They sent Christmas presents and gift cards for clothing and furniture. The two women, their husbands and another couple also are planning another trip to New Orleans to provide hands-on help in late spring.

"We want to follow their stories," says Karen Voepel, "give them hope and show them that we care."

"You can help in the smallest of ways. Just seeing the looks on the people's faces — they are always so thankful," Tonya Voepel says. "You can't just disconnect. It's hard to speak about; we've made this personal connection with them. It's very emotional."

Voepel also intends to connect with people across the globe through Share the Spirit.

"Our ultimate goal is Africa," she says. "We both have that as our goal."

Penny Zimmerman-Wills is a freelance writer who can be reached through the features editor at 788-1515.