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Senior moment

Helping 'nun' becomes habit

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Kiran Yocom's life has all the makings of a religious fairy tale. The founder of Seniors Helping Seniors was born into a wealthy family in India. Her grandmother was a strong woman who tried to control the young Yocom by reminding her she came from "blue blood."

"When I was 4 or 5, I fell down and my knee was bleeding," she says. Instead of pain, she felt indignation. "I was looking for blue blood. I went to my grandmother and said, 'You lied. My blood is red.'"

Her grandmother explained that her blue blood provided her with opportunities and riches others didn't have. And she must always act the part.

One of those opportunities was private school, which in India at the time meant she attended a convent school. The nuns weren't permitted to teach the Hindu children religion, but Yocom soaked up the atmosphere. "I was very attracted to God," she says.

Her family employed a driver who was a Christian, one of the lower castes in India, to drive her to school. He talked to her about a woman who was helping the poorest of the poor in India. Yocom remembers at 7 years old looking at the money her mother had just given her to spend at school and asked her driver, "What would you do with this money if you were poor?"

He told her about Mother Teresa, and I said, "Let's give her the money," Yocom says. The driver refused, telling her he'd be fired if her parents found out he'd been filling her head with Christian ideas. "I told him, 'I'll get you fired if you don't,'" she says, admitting she was a bit headstrong, like her grandmother.

The two decided the driver would take the money inside to Mother Teresa and that she'd stay in the car, so they wouldn't know who was donating the \$4. "So from 7 to 13, every month we'd go to the convent and give Mother the money," Yocom says.

One time Yocom accompanied the driver inside. When he would not give the nuns his name or tell them where he had gotten the money, they suspected the money might have



As a young Hindu growing up in India, Kiran Yocom was devoted to Mother Teresa, a Catholic Nun who changed the face of compassion. Now, through Seniors Helping Seniors®, Yocom and husband, Philip, hope to extend some of that compassion to seniors.

been stolen. Mother Teresa was standing there and when the driver looked down at Yocom, the sister realized the money was from a child. And that's when Mother Teresa became a real life influence. "I would find ways to see her; I followed her every move," Yocom says.

When she was 16, Yocom's family arranged for her to marry into an equally wealthy family. Yocom went to Mother Teresa and told her that now that she had access to her own money, she'd be able to help her more.

Yocom's husband died suddenly, leaving her with a baby. In the Indian culture, "one marriage is it," she says. In her grief, she went to "Mother" to beg her to explain why this would happen to her, after she had tried so hard to be faithful to God. "She told me, 'Child,' she always called me child, 'I have no answers for you,'" Yocom says.

Mother Teresa told Yocom she would teach her how to pray to God. She gave Yocom her personal Rosary beads.

Yocom says she went home and prayed and prayed and prayed. After two months of nothing happening, she returned to Mother Teresa's house and told her, "I'm very disappointed in your God," she says. "I prayed and I talked and he never appeared."

Mother Teresa looked at her and replied, "Child, you did all the talking and God did all the listening. When was it his turn to talk?"

Yocom went home and "I did all the listening and God did all the talking," she says.

She became one of Mother Teresa's followers. She gave most of her money to the church and then went out and "begged" for food and money to support Mother Teresa's ministry. She helped lepers and once held an abandoned two-week old baby who still had her umbilical cord attached. The mother of the child had left her on the nun's doorstep.

When her own daughter was accepted at a college in the U.S., in 1995, Yocom accompanied her to help settle her. She had intended to return to India, but her daughter persuaded her stay for a few months.

One night Yocom attended a show with her daughter and her friends. Philip Yocom sat in the seat next to her, and the two talked. When Philip Yocom asked her out, she refused, but her daughter talked her into it. Actually, she "blackmailed" her. "She said, 'You're not married. Do you want to be a burden on me?'" Yocom says, laughing. Like mother, like grandmother.

Their first date was to McDonald's, the only place Yocom would agree to meet him. And even though she warned him of the consequences if he was late - which he was - Yocom acquiesced and agreed to go on a drive with him. At the end of the date, Philip proposed. And after a quick conversation with God, Yocom agreed. "I am a small woman with a big faith," she says. "Ultimately, I said yes, which was the best thing that had happened to me."

Her company, Seniors Helping Seniors, is a continuation of her work in India. But this time instead of advocating for the poor, she's looking out for another often ignored segment of the population - the elderly. "Seniors need to be cared for," she says, passionately. "You can't become a nobody after being a somebody."

The company, which provides non-medical help to seniors living on their own, started out as a nonprofit. But Yocom and her husband, who had the franchise background, decided it could help more people as a franchise. "My goal is make this company big. I want to do good - and then make money."

The plane truth about Mother

When asked what Mother Teresa was like, Kiran Yocom tells this story:

A number of years ago, Mother Teresa was on a plane to go to a third-world country to help feed the poor. When the flight attendant served her meal, Mother Teresa refused to eat when people in other parts of the world were hungry. "How much is this tray of food worth?" she asked the flight attendant. "\$5?" the flight attendant replied warily.

"Then take this tray back and give me the \$5," Mother Teresa told her.

The flight attendant ran to the Captain and asked him what she should do. He said, "It's Mother Teresa; give her the money and we'll reimburse you."

When the flight attendant handed the nun the money, instead of thanking her, Mother Teresa ordered her to make an announcement asking the entire plane to skip their meal so the airline would give her the \$5 per meal.

Once again the attendant asked the Captain for advice. He told her to make the announcement, because most likely only a few people would skip the meal. However, the entire plane, with the exception of a couple of children, donated their meals.

The pilot radioed headquarters and informed them of his plight, and management agreed to have a check waiting for Mother Teresa when the plane landed.

Not content, the nun asked the flight attendant to wrap up the 300-plus meals for her take with her. By the time Mother Teresa exited the plane, she had the meals, the money for the meals, an additional donation from the airline and an escort to destination to help her serve the meals.

Yocom has a bit of Mother's relentlessness. Her advice: "Put your foot in the door, and God will do the rest."