



Charity Display?

I never felt like the face of poverty — until I met my benefactor.

By Charmie Gholson

I didn't recognize the cellphone on caller ID but answered anyway. A man started talking about a local charity. "Look," I interrupted, "I don't have any money to give you. My husband left me. I've got two little kids, and I'm behind on the rent."

He quickly clarified that he wasn't calling for a donation but to help. He said he was a doctor and a volunteer for an organization called Warm the Children, and I had signed up for help at my son's school. He offered to give me \$80 for each of my children to buy clothes. All I had to do was meet him at Meijer — a local, family-owned superstore — to do the shopping. I was shoving pants onto my son Gabriel, who never wants to get dressed, so it took a minute to comprehend: Could it be true?

The doctor mentioned filling out forms. While I imagined letting a stranger pay for our clothes, Gabriel took off his pants and ran away. Did I really want a handout? Should I endure a bit of humiliation to provide some essentials for my kids? I felt as if I had no choice. Sammy, my 7-year-old, had outgrown his shoes.

The night before we were to meet, the kids were with their dad, so I went to the store to shop, making sure to stay within the allotted amount. Then, I found a manager. We put a note on the clothes and left it behind the customer-service counter. I was hoping this would expedite the process and minimize my contact with the doctor: here we go, hey, thanks, goodbye.

In the morning I dressed the kids in clean clothes. (There, I thought, we don't look poor.) On the way to Meijer, the boys jumped in puddles, soaking themselves to the waist. With mud.

The lady behind the service counter couldn't find my basket but had a good idea where it went. "There's an Asian woman who doesn't speak English," she said. "I bet she put it all back." I ran around the store grabbing snow boots, dress shirts and socks I chose the night before.

While we waited by the entrance, my littiest guy climbed out of the cart and started hopping up and down while watching himself on a security monitor. I knew this dance; it meant I had about 10 minutes before he had a meltdown. I thought about leaving; maybe my father would give me more money. But then I saw Sammy, who never complains, just sitting bleary-eyed in the cart, tolerating his boredom.

When the doctor arrived, he looked as kind and reassuring as

he sounded on the phone. He greeted me and introduced a lanky teenager: "This is my son, Jack." He didn't tell Jack my name or introduce my kids. I shook Jack's hand before he retreated a safe distance behind his father, eyeballing my kids and me. I could not imagine why the doctor brought him along.

Once we were in line, I tried to keep the kids quiet; the doctor smiled and blinked at me. I talked nonstop, peppering Jack with polite questions: "What school do you go to? Do you play sports?" He gazed at the ground in my general direction. Occasionally he spat out a one-word answer. This stage of growing up is so awkward. I wondered who had it worse that morning, Jack or I.

The doctor showed me the forms we had to fill out. By mistake, he also handed me a set of instructions for how to facilitate this "encounter." At the top, it said: "DO NOT OFFER TRANSPORTATION TO THE CLIENTS." I looked at him in disbelief and repeated it aloud. *Do not offer transportation to the clients?* The doctor just shrugged. I couldn't tell if he was as embarrassed as I was, or if he had any idea how hard it was to accept charity.

Our cashier didn't know how to process my forms. After the manager showed her how, I realized I'd overshot my limit, so the cashier called the manager back for an override. The line behind us had grown long with frustrated shoppers, all of whom I assumed intended to pay for their purchases. Everyone stood in an uncomfortable silence — except my boys, who pestered me for some water and got way too close to the doctor. I fantasized about adopting a hillbilly accent and shouting, "Now you kids shut up er Santa ain't coming!" Finally we were done. Gabriel was clinging to me and chanting, "I want a drink." The doctor and his son said goodbye and high-tailed it out of there.

Back at home, a friend called. I couldn't shake the feeling that the doctor used me as an example. "For what?" she asked when I told her. "I'm not even sure," I said. To make his son grateful? To put a face on poverty? Realistically, the doctor could have just been on his way to drop his son somewhere, but now I was angry. At my soon-to-be ex-husband. At the polarized society we live in where the working poor voted themselves into deeper poverty while the rich still coast. Despite the doctor's best intentions, I felt scrutinized — especially with his son there to witness my inability to buy my own kids their damn socks.

"You are under an incredible amount of stress," my friend insisted. "I hardly remember most of my divorce."

With luck, neither will I. ■

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