



It was 5 a.m. in the air-conditioned hotel room when the alarm clock rang on Memorial Day, 2006. We quickly showered, got dressed, and blew dry our hair before taking the elevators to our packed cars in the parking lot below. Outside, streets were bare and quiet. In the distance, you could see the sun beginning to come up in the east. It was an easy ride into the city that holiday morning. Two cars were needed to carry the 272 pair of sneakers and eighty-five pounds of bananas we'd brought with us. Though a quiet holiday morning, we knew what was waiting at the other end of our journey. Homeless men and women were already lining up, just minutes away, at the Breadline of St. Francis Church on West 31st Street in Manhattan.

By 6 a.m., the sun was up and a warm, humid day began on the streets of New York City where a homeless woman sat up, stretched and awakened from her cardboard slab on the street. There, many more men and women were beginning their day and their trek from their sidewalk beds to The Breadline. Their daily sustenance would come from this holy, yet humble place where friars had been feeding the homeless since the days of the Great Depression. And today, we were there. How blessed we all felt.

It was Shannon who brought us here. This was her project. "Walk a Mile in My Shoes" was her way of celebrating an anniversary special to her - January had marked fifteen years since the day of her life-saving liver transplant. This year, Shannon had collected new sneakers for the homeless.

It began with a simple pair of socks. At the age of eleven, Shannon found a way to celebrate her life by remembering the life of family friend, FDNY Chaplain Father Mychal Judge, who was killed in the terrorist attacks on 9-11. Father Mychal had a special place in his heart for the homeless and he often shared that with us. We'd known him all our lives. Shannon's grandfather was an altar boy for him at St. Joseph's Church in East Rutherford, NJ in the sixties, and he was a constant presence in our lives as our family continued to grow.



In 1990 when Shannon was born with a rare and life-threatening liver disease, it was Father Mychal we called upon. Life was so uncertain for Shannon back then. She was not expected to live beyond her second birthday unless a new liver could be found. She was so sick. Her abdomen was distended, skin was yellow and she frequently vomited. She was too uncomfortable even to sleep. We all feared we would lose her. Giving Shannon back was one of the most difficult things we all had to do, but we knew that she couldn't be healed until we offered her back to God. And so we did, with Father Mychal's help. Once we let go, the doors began to open for us. We knew what we needed to do to save Shannon.

It was Shannon's Nana who helped prepare her little body for surgery. When Shannon was just months old, her Nana would sit her on the floor, hold her tiny hands, and pull her up to her feet. They did this over and over, day after day, week after week. No one knew then how important those exercises would be for Shannon.



Mrs. Sutton was the nutritionist on staff at Wyler Children's Hospital in Chicago when we arrived for the evaluation that day. She had a tape measure in her pocket that she used often in measuring the bellies of sick babies and toddlers. She advised us how important exercise and

good nutrition were in preparing a body for an organ transplant.

It was a cold day in Chicago on January 29, 1991 when Shannon received her new liver, a portion of her mother's liver in an experimental procedure. Seven month-old Shannon became the seventeenth patient in the United States to receive a liver from a living donor. Father Mychal was there to guide us, always at the other end of the phone offering prayers and words of encouragement and constantly reminding us not to worry about tomorrow. "Stay in today," he told us, "for God hasn't even created tomorrow yet."

As Shannon continued to heal, thrive and grow, Father Mychal remained a close friend to all of us. We visited with him one cold winter day at St. Francis Church in Manhattan. Shannon was 2 1/2 years old when he blessed her in the lobby of a church Shannon would come to know and visit often in the years ahead. On September 11, 2001, Father Mychal heard the fire alarm and rushed from his home on West 31st Street to the scene of the World Trade Center attacks. These would be his last footsteps on earth. That night, we received the phone call that would change our lives forever. How could we go on without the man who had guided us, loved us, taught us, and changed us? No one knew that the answer would come from Shannon.

Each year, Shannon celebrated the anniversary of her liver transplant with a party, cake and gifts. The year after September 11th was different. No one felt much like celebrating until Shannon approached us with an idea. "What if I collect socks for the homeless in lieu of gifts?" she asked us. "I'll celebrate my life by remembering his." It was a remarkable idea, and we all embraced the chance to celebrate a presence so strong in all our lives. Word spread quickly, and before long, Shannon had collected 1,500 pair of socks.

At the age of eleven, Shannon distributed those socks to the same homeless men and women Father Mychal had ministered to during his lifetime. Along with each pair of socks, she included a copy of his prayer, his interdenominational message of love. A man on the Breadline that day approached Shannon's Nana and asked her, "Do you happen to have any underwear?" The homeless men and women we'd met had many needs, but most were simple and basic, and most were needs we could meet. It was then that Mychal's Message was born. Since then, with the help of her family and friends, Shannon has chaired numerous projects, found-



ed a non-profit organization, and even helped produce a CD on which she sings, "Be Not Afraid." She has helped collect and distribute over 80,000 new items to the homeless.

Once a very sick baby not expected to live, today Shannon is a healthy teenager. In spite of her illness, she has overcome obstacles and is a living example of the advances in medical technology. When recently asked if she could imagine Mychal's Message remaining a part of her life in the future, she responded, "I can't imagine my life without it." In 2004, Shannon was recognized for her work by President George W. Bush when she met him in Willow Grove, PA. In his speech on Education later that day, he said, "Shannon is a soldier in the army of compassion." Today, dressed in red, white and blue, Shannon began distributing the eighty-five pounds of bananas with her brother and sister trailing behind her giving out American flags. "Bananas are greatly appreciated because they are soft and full of potassium," one man told us.

At 7 a.m., the doors of the church opened and friars began distributing brown-bagged sandwiches and coffee. They've been providing nourishment to the homeless for over seventy-five years. A man who identified himself as Jimmy chose a pair of white Velcro sneakers this morning. He leaned up against the church, removed his tattered, worn shoes and replaced them with his new ones. "You look like a new man," we told him. As we drove our cars away, he lifted his head and smiled at us. We'll be back again, we thought.



Shannon is currently working on "Blessed new underwear, socks and undershirts for the homeless. She will be distributing them in New York City on September 11, 2006, the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. For more information, please visit www.mychalsmessage.org