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By Andrea Ball, Austin American-Statesman Philanthropy Reporter

Judith Knotts is always on the prowl for food.

Not for herself, but for the homeless. Since she began volunteering with Mobile Loaves and Fishes — a nonprofit that provides food and clothing for the homeless — Knotts has been acutely sensitive to the needs of people who live on the streets. After attending one local charity function, she arranged to have the leftovers delivered to a nearby soup kitchen.

In her guest column today, Knotts, who is 69 and the retired head of school for St. Gabriel's Catholic School, says her volunteer work has profoundly affected her life.

Simple gifts, freely shared

By Judith Knotts

Her first treasures offered were a piece of cardboard and a jar to pee in. Laura, a transsexual woman who lived on the streets of Austin, was larger than life, in person and in spirit. At first glance, her manly features were apparent; however, as you got to know her, you began to appreciate her feminine grace. In the spring of 2003, I participated in the first Mobile Loaves and Fishes' spiritual retreat, which meant spending 72 hours living on the streets of Austin with backpacks and empty pockets. We were a motley group of men and women, focused in our faith, but greenhorns in the ways of the streets.

The first night I slept in an alley, closed in by an iron gate that in truth was more psychologically comforting than secure. Others slept in a "safe house," while a small band of brave men took to the streets and slept God knows where. The next day, I said to those risk-takers, "I want to go with you tonight." They mumbled half-heartedly, "OK," wondering what in the world to do with a 60-something-year-old woman while they went "Dumpster-diving" with the homeless.

Taking all of this in, Laura said, "Come stay with me. You don't want to go with them."

Now, Laura and I were nearly strangers. She did not know that I was a grandmother and head of a Catholic school, but somehow she zeroed in on who I was and felt I would be offended by the roughness.

I spent the next two nights sleeping on a first-floor porch of an abandoned building. Laura's secret "home" was the second floor porch. She explained how the cardboard would make a great mattress and the empty jar a daunting substitute for a toilet. These gifts were the first of many that Laura gave me. Generously sharing her street smarts and her soul with a stranger made us fast friends until her death.

Time, talent and treasure, the pillars of philanthropy, can surface anywhere. When we think of philanthropy, "the effort to increase human well-being," we usually envision foundations, nonprofits, programs and galas, forgetting that the literal meaning, "love of mankind," streams first from one heart and then spreads.

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