

Church, 4527 Freedom Drive, that supports children living in Charlotte's most impoverished areas.

At A Better World, Laura "got to know the kids in a way adults don't get to," her mother explained. "She would hear them talk. She heard the stories about their home life, and that it was great when they were at A Better World because they got a warm meal. But she also heard what it was like at their homes — maybe their lights had been cut off, or there wasn't any heat or food."

Gennings decided to build on A Better World's concept, but to provide relief to the entire family rather than just children. She wanted to generate a well of resources, financial and spiritual, for families needing assistance. And Laura wanted to serve as an intermediary, connecting members of Christ Resurrection, 70 percent of whom live in poverty, with community members willing to give. As long as there were people who would help shore up the foundation, she knew she'd be able to meet many needs.

A spirited fundraiser

With the maturity to form a vision and the gusto of youth, Laura said she didn't doubt her capabilities. "I didn't think about it failing, I just did it," she said. "You can't just sit around thinking about it. Sometimes you just have to do it."

Even if that means going door-to-door.

Her father, now the foundation's director, recalled a particularly hot stretch of weather in August 2007, shortly after Laura decided to launch New Leaf.

"We had a phone call from a single mother who had three young children. They were in this apartment (whose electricity had been turned off), just burning up," he said.

"I told Laura, 'I think we have a family,' and she just bolted out the door. She just left! She came back 30 minutes later with \$200 to pay (for the electric bill) and a fan."



Laura Gennings (left) hands Denise Pitts keys to her new Chevrolet van. The act of kindness is one of many the New Leaf Foundation facilitated since its 2007 launch. Photo courtesy of the Gennings family

Laura's mission has inspired others to get involved: two local brothers who'd received money from an aunt donated it to New Leaf; a high school student gave the foundation his entire savings, \$60; and a high school math teacher contributed \$1,500 over the course of several weeks. And after Laura appeared on Forest Hill Church pastor David Chadwick's radio show, more donations appeared.

The community's support has created positive change: Last year 40 turkeys were given to inner-city families, a child received much-needed orthodontic braces and a local furniture store stepped in to furnish a family's empty apartment.

A hand up

"Long-term" relief is the foundation's ultimate goal, explained John, who's been on board with his daughter's plan since she first approached him.

"We aren't helping people who are trying to work the system," he said, noting that Christ Resurrection Church pastor Ken Gilliard helps the foundation with its screening process. "These are people who are really givers. They're people who are looking to help others; they're just down and out on their luck."

"And they're people who deserve a break. The whole thing is to encourage families to give back, maybe not with money, but with a smile. We have a very high price when we agree to help. That's to be a giver ... to give back to someone else who's in need."

Strangers turned friends

Last December, it was Denise Pitts who needed more than she could afford. Pitts, who was trying to save enough money to start a cleaning business, but owned a 1993 Toyota Camry on its last legs.

"I laugh when I think about it now," said Pitts, who eventually found herself driving a car that had only one gear and no reverse.

"It was going to cost between \$1,600 and \$2,300 to repair it," Pitts explained, noting that in the past, every time the car was repaired, another need surfaced. "I said I was just going to trust God about that whole car issue."

Then, shortly before Christmas, she learned that John and Laura wanted to meet with her. "I

knew they did nice things for people, but I felt really awkward about that," she said. "I didn't think I had that kind of need."

After connecting with them, Pitts agreed to ride with them to an unknown location. "We were driving down Independence Boulevard together, and he cut his eyes at me and turned into a car lot," Pitts recalled. "I said, 'Oh! I'm starting to get excited!' He said, 'You should!'"

"All of a sudden he stops and points to an absolutely beautiful new van. ... He fished in his pocket and handed me the key. I totally and completely lost it!"

"The salesman was there saying, 'Get in! Get in!' I got in, but I was still gone. I was just in total praise. He tried to tell me the features, but I said, 'I'm so sorry, but I just can't hear you right now.' I just could not believe it!"

Then Laura caught her eye.

"Let me tell you something," Pitts said. "When we were at that dealership, if you could have seen Laura's face, you would have thought someone was giving her something. I was amazed at that little girl. Isn't she something? She has a heart bigger than North Carolina."

Now, almost a year later, Pitts said she can't put into words what the gift means to her. As she speaks, her voice trembles as she fights back tears.

"It is absolutely still affecting me," she said. "Not just for my business, but for my family."

Pitts said that in addition to allowing her to expand her cleaning business to commercial properties, the gift enabled her two grown children to attend their grandmother's out-of-town funeral service, an event they otherwise might have missed.

If it hadn't been for New Leaf, Pitts said she "shudders to think" what might have happened. "Honestly and truthfully, I just didn't see a way out," she said. "But I was trusting God anyway."

John and Laura agree that the foundation's goal is to facilitate growth, and they hope to extend New Leaf's reach to more than those connected to Christ Resurrection Church and A Better World.

"We want to create a circle of giving," John said. "It started out with strictly financial (giving). Now it's so much greater."



Laura and her father, John Gennings, serve the community through New Leaf Foundation, a nonprofit they created that connects low-income members of Christ Resurrection Church with financial and spiritual support.

Tim Steadman/CW photo

For Pitts, the Genningses' foundation not only gave her reliable transportation — a means to grow her business and get back on her feet — but also a realization.

"I know God takes you through different situations in life for a reason," she said. "I had to depend on strangers, but now they're friends." □

Want to help?

The New Leaf Foundation constantly needs resources, including grocery store gift cards, household supplies and money. John said when they receive a call, their savings drain quickly.

"We just paid two months' rent for a family last week," he said, explaining that families' urgent needs often require all the foundation's funds.

Partnering with A Better World, New Leaf hosted Thanksgiving dinner for more than 250 low-income people on Nov. 25, supplying them with additional food they could prepare for their own families on Thanksgiving Day.

New Leaf also plans to host a Christmas dinner but needs food, supplies, money and grocery store gift cards. In addition, New Leaf and A Better World will work together to host the seventh annual Adopt A Child for Christmas program. New Leaf is seeking sponsors willing to donate \$50 for gifts, clothing and a warm meal for each of the estimated 50 children participating.

The foundation's new initiative, Adopt A Family, is slated to provide more than 25 low-income families with food, clothing and gift cards. The cost to adopt a family is \$150.

The deadline for sponsorship for both programs is Dec. 12.

For more details, visit www.NewLeafFound.org.