

BOB LEVEY: KATHARINE GRAHAM: A FRIEND TO KIDS

By Bob Levey
Monday, July 23, 2001

During her 38 years at the helm of The Washington Post Co., Katharine Graham hobnobbed routinely with presidents and kings. But she never forgot that this was her home town. Or that some people who live here are short on advantages.

She was one of the most reliable, generous donors to charity I've ever known. She never sought credit or recognition. But she will get some of each this morning, from this corner. Without her, Send a Kid to Camp — our annual fundraiser on behalf of underprivileged local children — might very well not exist.

Not only did Katharine Graham donate to this campaign, and not only did The Washington Post do so (at her urging), but she also helped convince a certain columnist that the cause was a good one.

Return with us now to the thrilling days of August 1981. Levey had been columnizing for all of two months. Suddenly, the Washington Star folded.

For more than 30 years, the Star had run a campaign similar to Send a Kid to Camp.

But now that the newspaper was out of business, it looked as if the camping program might be, too.

Before she took over the reins of The Post, Katharine Graham had served on many local boards, including the one at Family and Child Services. FCS ran and still runs Camp Moss Hollow, where we send hundreds of children each year with the dollars you contribute to Send a Kid to Camp.

The late John Theban was the director of FCS in those days. He made an SOS call to Katharine Graham. She, in turn, made one to me.

Understand that Katharine Graham did not order me to spearhead a fundraising drive for campers. She was a publisher who stayed out of the way of her newsroom troops — usually far, far out of the way. She gave columnists an especially wide berth.

But on this day, she was pleading a case, on behalf of kids who really needed an advocate.

"Would you consider taking this on?" she asked.

Now, I may look like a moron, but even I wasn't dumb enough to slam down the phone on the biggest boss in the place. I said I'd be glad to talk to John Theban about it.

John opened my eyes to the wonders of camp — and to the expense of providing it to kids whose families were without resources. He explained the benefits, both at camp and later in life. He made the case that without money, the camping program would be a skeleton, or worse.

So I decided that Send a Kid to Camp would be my annual summer cause.

I know that Katharine Graham would never have uttered a word of irritation to me if I had "passed." But I also know that she made the first donation to my maiden camp campaign.

The note alongside her check was six letters long.

"Thanks," she wrote.

We should aim all the thanks back at her. She was willing to step up for the neediest children in this community when the chips were down.

I get far too much of the credit for the 20 years I've run the camp program, and the \$6 million-plus we've raised in that time.

The truth is, it all began with a publisher who knew what was right, and knew how to nudge the right guy.

A reminder as we head into the final week of the 2001 campaign:

A gift to Send a Kid to Camp is an excellent way to honor or remember someone. We are always happy to help you celebrate someone's birthday or wedding anniversary with a donation to our fund.

And we're always ready to send the honoree an acknowledgment.

Over the years, this idea has been especially appealing to relatives of the elderly. Does octogenarian Uncle Pete really need another tie, to go with the 35 you've already given him? Why not a gift to Send a Kid to Camp in his name, so that kids can have fun in the great outdoors?

Many thanks in advance for considering this.

Where are all the pennies?

For ages, we've accepted them for the benefit of our camp campaign. But the penny flow this year looks a little like the Rio Grande during dry season.

If you have a cache of pennies, please send them my way, for the benefit of the kids. They will appreciate it. So will I. So will your groaning dresser drawer.

Our goal by July 27: \$675,000.

In hand as of July 19: \$467,560.98.

TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE CAMPAIGN: Make a check or money order payable to Send a Kid to Camp and mail it to Bob Levey, The Washington Post, Washington, D.C. 20071.

TO CONTRIBUTE BY VISA OR MASTERCARD: Call Post-Haste at 202-334-9000 on a touch-tone phone. Then punch in K-I-D-S, or 5437, and follow instructions.

TO CONTRIBUTE ONLINE: Go to www.washingtonpost.com/camp. Click on the icon that says "Make Your Tax Deductible Donation." Then follow the prompts.