



Raegan Payne picks fruit .  
Photo from Raegan Payne

## The Good Muse Inspires Volunteers

BY SANDRA COOPERSMITH

Dr. Seuss could have been describing Raegan Payne's philosophy when he penned these words: "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." Happily, Payne does care, and she's giving her best efforts to get other to care as well.

Payne, a Westchester area actor and writer, is on a roll to complete 50 different volunteer activities by 2010 in what she has dubbed *Mission 50*. Over halfway there, she is journaling about each experience on TheGoodMuse.com, which she created as a forum to focus attention on people and organizations trying to make a positive impact in the world.

Her informative and entertaining journal started after a friend declined her invitation to help out at a soup kitchen. "I thought maybe other people don't volunteer because they don't know what to expect or because they are scared. I'm trying to take the fear out of the experience," she explained.

Payne emphasized that "anyone can find an activity that fits their talents and lifestyle or they might even learn something new. I've learned

how to correctly plant a tree, nurse a kitten back to health, teach a group of children to write, test water quality, use a power saw, and so much more. I'm pretty handy to have around now."

Although she's a professional actor whose credits include film, television and stage, Payne's dedication to volunteering is anything but an act. Delving into her Kentucky childhood she reminisced, "I tried to think back to my earliest volunteer activities, and the funny thing is they were so ingrained into my childhood it's hard to separate them from just 'fun experiences.' I remember doing art projects for people in nursing homes when I was really little and then visiting them to sing songs with my Brownie or Girl Scout troop.

"My mother and grandfather were huge influences and are probably the reason I volunteer today, my grandfather because he just did good things – he didn't schedule them or point them out, he just helped people – it was a part of who he was. My mother, his daughter, did the same thing. I remember sitting at the kitchen table at night packing paper lunch

See MUSE page 17

# Good Muse

from page 1

bags with nonperishable lunches to hand to the homeless who begged on the side of the road. We really didn't have a lot at the time, but my mom always said, 'There is always someone you can help. No matter how poor you are, you can always help.' It's just something we did, that's why I feel a compulsion to do it now."

Although Payne's original plan was to complete one volunteer activity per month, she accelerated her pace to encompass 50 by 2010 as a tribute to her grandfather, "Pa," after he died last December. She believes he "may just be the greatest man that ever lived." Describing him as "a man who was always kind but never called attention to his goodness," she reflected on the irony in her proposed tribute. "I volunteer for organizations and then call attention to it by writing about my little adventures for the world to read."

And Payne's experiences have indeed been adventures. Her volunteer journal, which starts in August 2008 with her slogging through horse manure during a stint at an organic farm, runs the gamut from humorous to poignant and encompasses a diverse array of groups. When asked to name just a couple of the volunteer activities that had the greatest impact on her, she responded, "This is akin to asking a mother to pick her favorite child because they all meant a lot in different ways, and I'm not done yet so this answer could change." After considerable reflection she said that "reading to kids with BookPALS and fostering animals for the Lange Foundation really affected me emotionally."

"I like reading to kids with BookPALS because I get to put my acting training to good use. I now read regularly at a school in Inglewood. The kids seem to love every book I read to them. They get so excited when I walk into their classrooms and if they see me walking through the school they will run up and give me a hug. It's so important for their

future well-being that they read or are read to as much as possible. Books can help instill values like be kind to animals, protect the environment, and help people. If children don't learn that then all the work I'm doing now is for naught.

"And fostering for the Lange Foundation was incredible. I had to bottle-feed six kittens and keep them for two weeks until they got strong enough to go back to the shelter and hopefully be adopted. Every time I walked into my bathroom, which was their nursery, all six of them would wake up and crawl to me meowing; then they would curl up in my lap and go to sleep. I cried and cried when I had to take them back. They were tiny, but so loving and funny. I will continue to help out Lange, especially now that companion animals are being treated so poorly and are abandoned haphazardly in this bad economy."

With the year more than half over, is it possible that Payne's Mission 50 may morph into Mission Impossible? Don't even think it: "I am definitely completing the mission by the end of the year, and failure is not an option. It's exciting. I have a list of all these charities I still have to volunteer with and people keep recommending more, which I love." And Payne, who is already a blood donor, is taking the concept of giving of herself to another level: "I've even got a haircut scheduled so I can give some of my hair to Locks of Love or Beautiful Lengths in the late fall. That one is scary because I've never had short hair, but I figure it's scarier for the people who are losing their hair. Hair is an easy sacrifice if it makes someone feel better."

She confirmed that the blog will remain active following the completion of Mission 50: "I probably can't maintain the pace but I will continue to search. I'd really like to travel and find more unique activities around the world. In the U.S. I know I'd love to do a report on the groups Puppies Behind Bars, Living Lands and Waters, and Food Gatherers. I actually have a list of groups I'll have to travel to but they

deserve to have their story told. I know I will continue finding new groups with different ideas." Echoing her mother, she says "there is always someone to help. In this economy not everyone can give regularly to a charity, but everyone can give their time."

And many groups such as BookPALS, with which Payne has developed a special affinity, would be unable to carry out their mission without those essential volunteer hours. BookPALS (Performing Artist for Literacy in Schools) is a literacy program from the Screen Actors Guild Foundation, founded by Barbara Bain on the premise that children must be exposed to the magic of books to develop a love of reading.

Susan Evers, the Los Angeles coordinator, told the *News* that Payne "has tackled not only our reading events but also just co-coordinated three schools for our We the Children autobiography program. All three schools were in some distressed neighborhoods and she managed to engage the children, all of whom finished their autobiography."

"We also have a Junior BookPALS department in which we utilized a Girl Scout troop for an event. Raegan assisted them with earning their silver award for literacy by doing a Love and Literacy after school event in Inglewood. Her best work is performing for an audience of children, who intently listen to her storytelling. Always jumping in and lending a hand when it comes to the future of children, she has made a huge impact with volunteering for BookPALS."

Payne's enthusiasm and mission also impressed and motivated Lisa Eskanos, whom she met at My Stuff Bags, which provides bags containing donated new items to the abused or neglected children who arrive at crisis centers and foster homes with few or no personal belongings. "As I have a milestone birthday coming up," Eskanos told the *News*. "I decided to celebrate it by following Raegan's lead and hosting a 'Birthday Challenge.' For my upcoming

ing 50th birthday, I invited friends and family to join me in volunteering hours equal to their age.

“For example, on March 5, 2011, when I turn 50, I will have volunteered 50 hours. Those friends and family who complete their volunteer hours equal to their age by March 2011 will get \$50 donated to the charity of their choice and their name displayed on my birthday cake. I thought the challenge will have a positive impact on those dear to me, those who benefit from the volunteerism, and my view of hitting a milestone. I shared Raegan’s website information with others so they can get ideas of where to volunteer and be inspired to complete the challenge.”

Payne appears to be per-



*Reagan Payne inspires volunteers with her blog, the Good Muse about her efforts. Photo from Payne*

fectly cast as the Dolly Levi of the nonprofit community, giving those who visit TheGoodMuse.com just the push it takes to find their match and make the world a better, kinder and more enlightened place.