

COMPASSIONATE WOMEN

By Liz French

THE ROMANCE COMMUNITY is, in general, a compassionate one, filled with women — mothers, writers, caregivers, animal lovers, soldiers' wives, nurturers, lovers and fighters — who care. Here is a look at some authors and their pet causes.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

FOOD. A ROOF over your head. Clean drinking water. You need these necessities before anything else. **Bonnie Vanak** knows this firsthand. As a writer and fundraiser for *Food for the Poor*, Vanak travels to Haiti, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and other poor countries where the organization sends food, builds houses and orphanages and does what it can to ease the suffering. "The reality of what I see when I travel there is brutal," Vanak says. "So I started writing romances. I wanted to craft my own stories with guaranteed happy endings because some of what I see doesn't end happily."

Of course Vanak does see happy endings at her job, and she incorporates the bravery of the women and children she meets into various characters in her books. "The book that will really reflect my 13 years of working in developing countries is *The Scorpion & the Seducer*, my next *Dorchester* release," she adds. Jasmine, the novel's heroine, is rejected by English society "because of her skin color and her Egyptian heritage. She's a reflection of all the rejected, impoverished children I've met who are ostracized and just want to be loved and accepted for who they are."

Erotica author **Darragha Foster** decided to make charitable contributions when the third book in her *Teaching Old Gods New Tricks* series came out. "I didn't have a specific charity in mind," she says, but when she heard about *Heifer International*, an organization that provides starter livestock to needy communities through the League of Amazing Writers, she clicked with it. "I donate funds monthly to purchase a flock of chickens or a beehive. That's what I gave as Christmas gifts this year," she says. "A flock of chickens can provide eggs for food sales to others and fertilizer for crops. It's not just handing a family a fryer and saying, 'Eat up!'"

CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME

FOR MANY AUTHORS, the cause begins right in their living room and branches out. The desire to ease the suffering of family members then extends to the family of man.

RT readers are familiar with **Brenda Novak's** crusade to stamp out juvenile diabetes and her good work raising money



Romance Authors Spread the Love

via an online auction at her website. The diagnosis of Novak's son with the ravaging disease prompted her to action.

It was much the same for historical author **Elizabeth Boyle**, whose 6-year-old son, Matthew, is autistic. "There are so many families like mine — one out of every 166 children has autism in our country — who are struggling with the stress, financial costs and difficulties of finding help," Boyle says. She donates to a Washington state-based organization, *Families for Effective Autism Treatment*, and a national organization, *Autism Speaks*. Like Novak, Boyle has harnessed the power of the Internet, auctioning off the naming rights to a character in her upcoming Avon book, *Gentlemen Need Not Apply*. "The final bid was \$7,000," she says. "After that, I knew I could do more, so I pledged a portion of my royalties to both charities."

Julianne MacLean also donates a portion of her proceeds to a children's hospital, *IWK Health Centre*, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. When MacLean's daughter Laura contracted the E.coli infection, then developed hemolytic uremic syndrome and kidney failure, the center pulled her back from the brink. "I came very close to losing my little angel," the historical author says, adding that the two months she spent in the hospital was "the most horrific time in my life, but how grateful I was to the amazing nurses and doctors who took such good care of her."

Sharon Short found a worthy cause close to her Ohio home while she was researching autistic adults for her *Josie Toadfern Stain-Busting* mysteries. Josie is caretaker for her cousin Guy, who lives in a home quite like the real-life *Bittersweet Farms*, a holistic, farm-based vocational residential program in northwestern Ohio. In her books, Short renamed the home Stillwater Farms and moved it to south-central Ohio.

"I observed how the caretakers at Bittersweet worked with each adult as an individual, not 'fighting' the condition but working around and with it to help each adult fulfill his or her abilities,"

says Short, who's contributed items for a fundraising auction and donated proceeds from her book sales.

BLESS THE BEASTS AND THE CHILDREN

THE DESIRE TO protect society's more powerless moves some authors — mothers, foster parents, animal rescuers, etc. — to give to children's charities and animal shelters.

Linda Lael Miller owns a menagerie of dogs, horses and cats and often includes animal characters in her books. She's active with the *Humane Society of the United States* and is currently involved with the society's Pets for Life program. Pets for Life helps humans deal with their pets' behavioral issues and keep the critters for life instead of returning them to shelters or abusing them. Miller and her publisher, Harlequin, are co-sponsoring a contest for "the most awesome adopted pet" to benefit the Humane Society (see "Log On and Learn More," below).

Short also volunteers at a nearby animal shelter, leads a Girl Scout troop and volunteers locally as a literacy tutor. "I like to think that my storytelling also makes a positive difference in people's lives, whether it's to have a laugh, escape for a bit or experience a story in which the main character's sense of compassion is so important," she says.

Sonya Kate Childers supports the *St. Jude Children's Research Hospital*. Afflicted since her youth with various illnesses, such as Lupus and fibromyalgia, the 40-year-old author says she didn't experience the "harsh stages" until age 30. "I can't imag-

ine being their age and having to endure the pain I go through on a daily basis," she says. "I've experienced a great deal of what life has to offer, but how much of that can you do when you're a sick child? Sick children miss out on so many pleasures we adults take for granted."

Susan Elizabeth Phillips gives money to *First Book*, a charity that gives children from low-income families an opportunity to read and own their first new books. "Books played such an important part in my life when I was a child, and I can't bear the idea of children not owning their own books," the author says.

Bonnie Vanak is happy to report that because of her book sales, she and her husband are able to sponsor an orphan in Guatemala through Food for the Poor. Julianne MacLean, who says she and her husband wanted their daughter (who made a full recovery) to "understand how fortunate we are and to learn the importance of giving," sponsors a child in Africa through the Canadian organization *Plan*, formerly known as Foster Parents Plan.

Bonnie Vanak with Haitian orphans



SISTERS DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES

A LOT OF ROMANCE authors know how hard it is for a woman to make it — and stay happy and healthy — in this world. They've experienced their own hard times and now they're in a position to help their sisters in need.

Francis Ray says she was "stunned and saddened" to learn that Texas is No. 1 nationwide in deaths related to domestic violence. Ray discovered this grim statistic when she

LOG ON & LEARN MORE

ELIZABETH BOYLE, ElizabethBoyle.com • FEAT (Families for Effective Autism Treatment) of Washington, FEATwa.org • Autism Speaks, AutismSpeaks.org

ALESSIA BRIO, AlessiaBrio.com • Coming Together, EroticAnthology.com

RACHEL CAINE, RachelCaine.com • Susan G. Komen Foundation, Komen.org

SONYA KATE CHILDERS, SonyaKateChilders.com • Support Our Soldiers America, Inc., SOSAmericanInc.org • St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, StJude.org

DARRAGHA FOSTER, DarraghaFoster.com • Heifer International, Heifer.org • Global Fund for Women, GlobalFundForWomen.org • Southwest Indian Relief Fund, SWIRC.org • Soka Gakkai International (SGI)-USA, SGI-USA.org

LISE FULLER, LiseFuller.com • The Home Front Cares, TheHomeFrontCares.org

JULIANNE MACLEAN, JulianneMacLean.com • IWK Hospital for Children (Halifax, Nova Scotia), IWKFoundation.org • Plan (Foster Parents Plan), FosterParentsPlan.ca • World Vision, WorldVision.org

LINDA LAEL MILLER, LindaLaelMiller.com • Humane Society

of the United States, HSUS.org • Linda Lael Miller Scholarships, see LindaLaelMiller.com for details

SOPHIA NASH, SophiaNash.com • The Red Cross, RedCross.org • America Supports You, AmericaSupportsYou.mil

BRENDA NOVAK, BrendaNovak.com • Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, JDRF.org

SUSAN ELIZABETH PHILLIPS, SusanElizabethPhillips.com • First Book, FirstBook.org • Teens Alone of Minneapolis, TeensAlone.org

FRANCIS RAY, FrancisRay.com • The Turning Point Legal Fund, information at: FrancisRay.com

KATE ROTHWELL, KateRothwell.com • Catholic Charities of Hartford Diocese Migration & Refugee Services, CCAOH.org; Catholic Charities USA, CatholicCharitiesUSA.org • Bosnian crafts, KateRothwell.com/crafts.html

SHARON SHORT, SharonShort.com • Bittersweet Farms, BittersweetFarms.org

BONNIE VANAK, BonnieVanak.com • Food for the Poor Inc., FoodForThePoor.org

READERS, AUTHORS: What about your favorite charity? E-mail Liz@RomanticTimes.com with a brief description, including website, and we'll mention it in a future issue.

was doing research for *The Turning Point*, her 2001 St. Martin's mainstream fiction title. She formed *The Turning Point Legal Fund* and adopted a southern branch of The Family Place, a women's shelter that oversees the fund. So far, Ray has raised \$7,000 and she donates between 2 to 5 percent of her royalties to the fund as well. "I've been blessed, and I felt the need to help women who aren't," she says.

"I just do what I can and hope and pray the fund helps a woman achieve a better, safer life."

Along with scores of other authors, Weather Wardens writer **Rachel Caine** is a breast cancer survivor. "It's so important to spread the word about early detection and treatment, and I'm living proof," she says. Caine champions the *Susan G. Komen for the Cure* foundation, whose headquarters are near her home in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area. "In more than 18,000 communities across the U.S., more than 75,000 Susan G. Komen volunteers work to help fund breast cancer education, screening and treatment projects for those who need it most — a critically important step in the early detection of the disease," she says. "Especially for those not lucky enough to have the support of jobs, friends and family (and readers!) that I did." Caine regularly donates to the organization and sponsors participants in fundraising walks. "I hope to do next year's three-day walk in Dallas to get the full experience," she adds.

Darragha Foster supports the *Global Women's Fund* "because it seeks to educate and improve human rights for girls and women where women have long been silenced by oppressive men in control of the very air their own daughters, wives and sisters breathe."

Linda Lael Miller also wants to give women room to breathe — and get ahead. Six years ago, she founded a scholarship program that disperses grants of \$1,000 to women 25 years or older "seeking to improve their lot in life through education." Miller is doubling the number of recipients this year to 10. The grants are especially useful for women who have difficulty qualifying for college scholarships due to age or other factors. The money may be used for tuition and books or for childcare, transportation or other obstacles to pursuing higher education.

CHARITY BEGINS ON THE HOME FRONT

AUTHORS AND READERS ALIKE, whether they support the war or not, are concerned about our soldiers fighting overseas. When *RT* founder **Kathryn Falk** started *Support Our Soldiers America, Inc.*, a community of volunteers sprang up to help boost U.S. troops' spirits. Sonya Kate Childers and her family adopted a soldier, mailing care packages, organizing letter-writing drives and contributing to buy much-needed combat gear. "It was a rewarding experience for all of us and resulted in a lifelong friendship with his family," she says. Her soldier made it home safely, "but for countless others, the outcome is not so positive. These folks definitely need our help."

Sophia Nash traces her support for our armed forces to her



Julianne MacLean (right) with her mother and daughter at IWK Health Centre.

father, who served under General Patton during World War II. "Anything we can do to support our troops is crucial," says the author, who recommends e-mailing troops directly through the *America Supports You* website (see "Log On & Learn More," page 15). Nash also works with SOS America, Inc., and various tsunami and New Orleans relief efforts. She even incorporates soldiers' struggles into her

historical books. "Many of my novels feature heroes and other characters returning from the Napoleonic wars with some form of battle fatigue or injuries," she adds.

Cerridwen author and military wife **Lise Fuller** looks to *The Home Front Cares* for support when her husband is deployed. "You're D.O.T.H. — deployed on the home front," the Colorado-based author says of the spouses and families left behind when their soldiers ship out. "The Home Front Cares was developed by two retired service members who know what it's like at home because they were on the other end when it happened to their families. They wanted to help." Fuller helps them help others by contributing part of her earnings from her military hero books.

WAR: WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

THE EFFECTS OF WAR aren't limited to just U.S. soldiers, of course. Author **Kate Rothwell** works with Bosnian refugees in her Connecticut town under the auspices of the *Catholic Charities Refugee Services*. "I've been doing it since 1998," Rothwell says. "I've heard stories from people who have lost every one of their family members. But their strength can be inspiring." Rothwell sells the handicrafts that Bosnian women knit, crochet and weave on her website. "I was fairly apolitical when I first started working with the refugees, but now I'm extremely anti-war," she says. "War hurts more than just the soldiers and the civilians involved in it. The damage lasts for decades."

Darragha Foster works to prevent the damage violence causes before it starts. Another charity in her little black book is *Soka Gakkai International (SGI)-USA*, an American Buddhist association that promotes world peace and individual happiness based on the teachings of the Nichiren school of Mahayana Buddhism. "Gandhi said, 'You must be the change you want to see in the world,'" Foster says. "By making daily, personal, positive cause toward change, the effects will flood throughout society and the world."

Those acts of kindness can range from contributing to a charity anthology — as erotica author **Alessia Brio**, a founding member of *Coming Together*, a charity anthology group, does — mailing a check to your favorite organization, reaching out to those in need nearby or just educating yourself and others.

"We all have talents that we were given that can be used to bless the lives of others," says Elizabeth Boyle. "How we use those talents, I believe, will one day be the measure of our life." Bonnie Vanak adds, "When we reach out to help a cause that makes the world a better place, we get back so much more than we give."

But Brio sums it up best: "Giving is just plain sexy." ✧