



God's Love



By Shirley Cox,
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Bessie McPeek understands struggle, poverty, and despair. She decided to do something about it!

Bessie McPeek understands struggle. As a young child, she watched her Dad come home from work in a dark coal mine and stand his blue denim overalls beside the heating stove to thaw. She grew up witnessing the effects of poverty, uncertainty, and despair in the faces around her.

Bessie calls the beautiful Southern Appalachian Mountains in Jenkins, Kentucky, (pop. 2560) her home. The area is almost entirely dependent on its greatest natural resource-coal. In the year 2000, Letcher County mines produced over 10 million tons of coal. The mountains that make the area so beautiful, and provide the coal, also create relative isolation and hinder an efficient highway system to access the country's markets; a fluctuating market that causes mine closings and layoffs. When a large mine closes, hundreds of workers are forced to apply for welfare to feed their families. When they do work, third- and fourth-generation miners live with the dread of black lung disease and mining accidents.

Several years ago, Bessie experienced feelings of

hopelessness in her own life. "I was divorced and had three small children," she said. "I needed surgery to remove a 14-pound tumor." Reluctantly, she applied for welfare to feed her three children and pay medical bills. When the Cabinet for Health and Family Services in Whitesburg offered her a secretarial position, Bessie began working to earn her welfare check. During that difficult period, God gave her the idea of making homemade lollipops to sell. "I did this in order to survive," she said. "That first year, I sold 22,000 to schools and churches. I helped put one of my children through college with those lollipops."

These personal struggles have given Bessie, a Mission Service Corps missionary with the North American Mission Board, unique insight into the plight of young mothers. To meet their needs, she began "God's Love from a Diaper Bag," a diaper ministry that reaches over 200 families each month. After working her "regular job" all week, Bessie distributes diapers and baby clothing to mothers in the evenings and on weekends.



"Many of the mothers are very young," she said. "Most do not have an education. Others need help temporarily while attending college. Sometimes mothers do not have a single diaper for their baby. One child had not had a clean diaper for three days. One little girl even sold her wedding rings to buy diapers," she said. "Nobody chooses to be poor. It is because of the lack of education and jobs."

Along with diapers, Bessie offers encouragement and hope. "God knew one day He would use me to help others," she said. "I praise God that I had to go through the surgery in order to have compassion for those in need. When they come to me, crying, I can say, 'Honey, there is hope for you.' I use this opportunity to show them they are not alone. God is always with them."

Bessie's faith in God was tested in February 2003. With no resources to support the diaper ministry, she knelt at the altar at Faith Baptist Church in Myra, Kentucky, and whispered a prayer. "Lord, please let me know if you want my ministry to continue,"



she prayed. "If not, I will go anywhere, do anything for you. You just let me know." Two days later, she received a call requesting an interview for an article for the

Appalachian Regional Ministry newsletter that reaches eleven states. The next week, Southern Baptist missionary Bill Barker told her story to a lady in Kershaw, South Carolina, who had asked if she could help a ministry center in Appalachia. The lady donated \$2,000 in cash along with \$500 worth of new baby clothing to "God's Love From a Diaper Bag." Bessie found a source to purchase 16,000 diapers for \$143 and rented a storage building.

Since the first news article, this very shy Appalachian woman has had several newspaper and radio interviews and appeared on five television shows in Kentucky and Tennessee. In May, she was a guest on a live telecast in Louisville, Kentucky, one that reaches a million homes and 22 cable affiliates. She has spoken to WMU groups, women's groups, local churches, and several churches in North and South Carolina. She uses every interview as an opportunity to tell about Jesus. "At the altar, I promised God that if he would allow me to do my ministry, I would tell the things He has done in my life," she said.

The media exposure has earned her a reputation as "The Diaper Lady," a name Bessie enjoys because it opens doors for her ministry. "We have gained access to community rooms in two housing projects in Whitesburg where a Christian domestic violence counselor and I meet with 42 women each month," she said. Bessie distributes diapers while the counselor assures the women that she is available. "Usually, after we earn their trust, they open up and relate family problems they are experiencing," Bessie said. She has also provided diapers and clothing for clients of Letcher and Knott County health departments. When a four-year-old child wore her mother's shirt to school, Letcher County Head Start called Bessie. The little girl began to cry when she saw her new clothing.

God has used the media. "Several people have called from other states saying they could not rest or sleep until they offered to help," she said. In July, Bessie was local coordinator for a missions team from three Baptist churches in North Carolina. The group, which included a clown ministry, conducted three Backyard Bible Clubs and held a Celebrate Jesus Festival in Whitesburg City Park. Thirty-five people accepted Christ during the week. The team brought 500 Bibles, 200 pairs of new shoes, clothing, and diapers. A few months later, a tractor-trailer arrived with children's clothing and nursery supplies from Knoxville, Tennessee.

Bessie prayed again; this time for more storage space. "I was already renting three storage spaces," she said. "Two days later, the Letcher County Judge-Executive made four large rooms available to my ministry, rent-free, in the old Jenkins High School building."

At Christmas, Bessie coordinated three missions teams from North and South Carolina. They distributed food, clothing, gifts,

and toys to 600 families. A lady from South Carolina who organized one of the teams said God spoke to her in a dream, telling her to "go feed Kentucky." Her church brought 240 Bibles, 277 boxes of food, 500 pounds of potatoes, and over 300 boxes of blankets, diapers and clothing. Bessie's husband Lester, also a Mission Service Corps missionary, works beside her, along with her three children and granddaughter. As Bessie has experienced God's transforming power through her ministry, she has learned to view each new day as an adventure with Him.



"Every day, when I awake, I ask God, 'What person are you going to put before me today, what situation?'" she said. "I want to show people the amazing love of God and how He has blessed



my life and will bless theirs if they will surrender to Him. Someday, I hope to have an ice-cream truck stocked with ice cream, lollipops, and diapers and travel into the hills and hollows and spread God's love from a diaper bag."

(Featured Article on Bessie McPeek from the October 2004 Missions Mosaic, used by permission.)

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