



A Gift of Hope: Helping the Homeless

By Danielle Steel

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In her powerful memoir *His Bright Light*, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Danielle Steel opened her heart to share the devastating story of the loss of her beloved son. In *A Gift of Hope*, she shows us how she transformed that pain into a campaign of service that enriched her life beyond what she could imagine.

For eleven years, Danielle Steel took to the streets with a small team to help the homeless of San Francisco. She worked anonymously, visiting the “cribs” of the city’s most vulnerable citizens under cover of darkness, distributing food, clothing, bedding, tools, and toiletries. She sought no publicity for her efforts and remained anonymous throughout. Now she is speaking to bring attention to their plight.

In this unflinchingly honest and deeply moving memoir, the famously private author speaks out publicly for the first time about her work among the most desperate members of our society. She offers achingly acute portraits of the people she met along the way—and issues a heartfelt call for more effective action to aid this vast, deprived population. Determined to supply the homeless with the basic necessities to keep them alive, she ends up giving them something far more powerful: a voice.

By turns candid and inspirational, Danielle Steel’s *A Gift of Hope* is a true act of advocacy and love.

Praise for *A Gift of Hope*

“[A] moving call for action.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Moving . . . The mega-selling, notoriously private author . . . is candid and honest about her own private life in a way we’ve never seen before.”—**Books for Better Living**

“Most assume that Steel’s life is as glamorous as her fiction. . . . The real Steel is a bit more complicated.”—*San Francisco Chronicle*

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

Danielle Steel has been hailed as one of the world’s most popular authors, with over 600 million copies of her novels sold. Her many international bestsellers include *The Sins of the Mother*, *Friends Forever*, *Betrayal*, *Hotel Vendome*, *Happy Birthday*, *44 Charles Street*, and other highly acclaimed novels. She is also the author of *His Bright Light*, the story of her son Nick Traina’s life and death, and the memoir *The Gift of Hope*.

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One

How and Why “Yo! Angel!” Started

The homeless outreach team that changed my life, and that of many others, began at a very dark time for me. My son Nick showed signs of suffering from bipolar disease from his earliest childhood. At eighteen months, I found him “different,” and precocious long before that (he walked at eight months and spoke in full sentences in two languages when he was a year old). At four, I was convinced that he was manic. When he was five, I sought advice from doctors and psychiatrists who brushed off my concerns, and assured me he was “fine.” And when he was seven, I alternated between panic and despair, convinced that he was sick, begging for help for him, while every doctor I consulted reassured me and insisted there was nothing wrong. I have a great fondness now for doctors who respect the bond that mothers have with their children and acknowledge that we know them best of all. I knew my son was sick, but no professional would agree.

When Nick was a very young child, which is not so very long ago, the tradition adhered to by most psychiatrists was that manic depression (or bipolar disease as it is more frequently called now), could not be diagnosed until a patient was in his early twenties, and was staunchly never medicated before that age. The medication most commonly used for bipolar disease was lithium. And it was considered exceptional and almost revolutionary when I found a very respected expert on manic depression at UCLA, who gave Nick lithium at sixteen. And for a brief time, lithium was a miraculous wonder drug for him. For the first time in years he was able to lead what appeared to be a totally normal life because of the drugs, and his diagnosis was established: He was bipolar. To be diagnosed at that age was almost unheard of then. Today, they give lithium to children suspected of being bipolar at four or five. That was unthinkable when Nick was that age.

And the belief now is that if you diagnose and medicate bipolar children, they have a much better chance of having a normal life later on.

I've written a whole book about Nick, his illness and his life, his victories and defeats, and our great love for him, so I won't go into detail here. He had two very good years of productive, normal life once he was medicated. And at eighteen, still on the appropriate drugs, he felt so normal that he insisted he wanted to stop taking them. Much to my chagrin (and terror), he spiraled down immediately once off them, and within five weeks he made his first suicide attempt, and very nearly succeeded. Miraculously, he survived, and assured me he wouldn't do it again, but did so ten days later, and was saved again. He made three unsuccessful suicide attempts in three months, then got back on his medications and improved immediately, and with the naivete of a loving parent, I thought we were home free. After those three suicide attempts, he seemed better, happier, more productive, and more functional than he had ever been, until fierce depression hit him again six months later. He made his final and tragically successful suicide attempt eleven months after the first one, and died at nineteen.

It was a heartbreaking time for me, my eight other children, and all those who knew and loved Nick. Although I have eight wonderful children for whom I am immeasurably grateful, he left an enormous hole in our lives, and will be forever missed. The first months after he died were bleak, to say the least. Like many grieving parents, I had a hard time getting from one day to the next.

To compound things further, as sometimes happens at difficult times, like after a death--particularly the death of a child--my marriage disintegrated as well. Life couldn't have seemed worse. And as the holidays approached, I was in dark despair.

Years before, I had learned a valuable lesson from my oldest daughter, then only fourteen. She had a serious moped accident in our driveway, which damaged her knee, resulting in seven years of grueling physical therapy and repeated surgeries, and kept her on crutches and in wheelchairs for those seven years. It would have been challenging for anyone, and even more so for a young girl of fourteen. She was extremely brave and in constant pain, and to distract her from her troubles, one of her doctors suggested that she work with people who were even more unfortunate than she. She took the advice to heart, and within a short time she had volunteered in a pediatric cancer ward. And there she found not only something to think about other than her injury, she found her true passion and lifelong vocation. She spent hours there, fell in love with the young patients, volunteered for many years at a summer camp for kids with cancer, and many degrees later, she is a therapist and social worker in a pediatric oncology ward. I can't think of a more heartbreaking job. I admire her immensely for it, and she loves what she does. It is her passion. And I'm sure that in the beginning, at fourteen, it helped keep her mind off her leg and the agony she was in.

During those early days and months after my son's death and the end of my marriage, trying to find some meaning to life and to struggle through such hard times, I went to church every day. I realize that's not for everyone, but it helped get me through it, and to hang on till the next day. And one dark winter evening, I was thinking about what my daughter had done in her teens, reaching out to help people who were in even greater distress than she was, and I prayed about it, kneeling in a dark, candle-lit church. The only things that were keeping me going then were my children and my faith. So with my face in my hands, I prayed for something to make me hold on, and to find a way to help someone else in greater need. The answer came faster than I expected, was loud and clear, and was by no means the answer I wanted. I don't know if I even knew what I hoped the message would be, but surely not the one I got. I didn't like the thought that popped into my head within minutes of my prayer and request for direction and guidance. It came to me very simply: Help the homeless. And all I could think was Oh no!! Not that!! Please!!

I remained kneeling for a while, and then lit some candles, trying to pretend that I hadn't heard that message clearly in my head. How about some other project? Working with children maybe--I was good at that--or some other nice, neat, clean line of work. All my life I had been a somewhat skittish person, nervous about unusual or ominous-looking people, frightened when drunks or homeless people approached me on the street. It was something I didn't want to see. Their intrusion into my neat, orderly, clean life was something I wanted to avoid, not embrace. But suddenly, in reality, there was no longer perfect order in any aspect of my life anyway. With my son's death and husband's departure, my life was a mess. My life, head, and heart were in disarray. Nick's death had nearly destroyed me, my whole family was badly shaken. Everything had changed.

My children were remarkable to me and one another during that incredibly hard time. There was a sense of solidarity and determined survival, from children who were still so young (five of them from nine to fifteen at the time of their brother's death, and still at home). Although we were very close before Nick's death, it has created an even stronger bond between us since. I remember thinking one night right after he died, as we all gathered for dinner, that we were like survivors of the Titanic or some other shipwreck, huddled over our plates, and barely able to speak in our communal pain. And yet we hung on to one another, determined to get through it and one day come to life again. It was a slow and grueling process, with some heavy bumps along the way.

Into that atmosphere of life gone awry, and even despair, came the remarkable message I heard in church: Help the homeless. Nuts .??. no, no .??. anything but that. I resisted the thought with all my might. But I also remembered Nick had always been particularly sensitive to the plight of the homeless. Whenever he saw a homeless person, he would stop what he was doing, go to the nearest restaurant or food store, and buy them a meal and "a pack of smokes." He would return with his offering, never too busy to take the time to do it. He visited shelters, and as the lead singer of an increasingly successful band, he performed at family shelters whenever he could. So I knew that helping the homeless would have been meaningful to him, which made the voice harder to ignore. But I still didn't like the idea. Not at all!

I had already organized a nonprofit foundation in his name, to assist the mentally ill. But this was different. It was about the homeless. Because the idea had come to me in prayer, the message had a sacred meaning to me and I felt as though I was supposed to follow it, even if I didn't want to. It was close to Christmas, and it seemed like I'd just been given an assignment from "upstairs." I argued with the idea anyway. Wherever the message came from, I spent several more minutes on my knees in church that night, negotiating .??. come on, God .??. not that .??. how about something else? No deal. The message kept coming like a subliminal ad: Help the homeless. Too bad if you don't like it. You asked who to help. I told you. Now go do it. (I was not thrilled.)

Worse, I had a strange, overwhelming feeling that I had no choice. But believe me, the thought of helping the homeless scared me to death. Being at close range seemed terrifying. I suspect this isn't a unique reaction, since most of us would rather pretend the homeless don't exist. People look through them on the streets, turn away, don't meet their eyes, and whenever possible, would prefer to cross the street to avoid them. Most would rather leave solving the problem, and ministering to the homeless, to someone else. And to be honest, in my own ignorance that night, so would I. But being a religious person, I figured I had been given a job, and however I felt about it, no matter how reluctant or terrified I was, there was no turning back, no way to act as though I hadn't heard what I did. I was sorry I had asked, as I walked quietly out of church.

I thought about the response to my prayers when I went home that night and the next day, and the day after. But the clear directive wouldn't go away. And finally, I thought, Okay, God, I get it, I hear you.??? Okay, I'll do it. I figured that doing it once would get me off the hook. And hell, I could do anything once. Couldn't

I? Yeah, right. So I thought about what to do. I asked a dedicated employee of mine if he'd come out with me on a night just before Christmas, and being a kind person, he agreed. I bought warm down jackets, a stack of sleeping bags, and some wool socks and gloves. I can't remember how many, probably around forty or fifty of each. We put it all in a van, and set out on a bitter cold night. And I will admit that I was gritting my teeth, but there was something of an adrenaline rush too. I don't think it was excitement as much as fear. I had no idea who or what we would encounter, nor what to expect, and I was anxious to fulfill my mission, do the job, and get it over with. Nothing in the message I'd heard said I had to do it more than once.

I remembered a few homeless people I had seen in regular spots in doorways in my neighborhood, so we stopped there first. People were already tucked in for the night by the time we went out, shielded behind pieces of cardboard boxes and staying warm as best they could. And the reaction we got, each time we stopped, was one of surprise, and instant gratitude. Suddenly, their faces lit up, as clean, new, good-quality sleeping bags were put into their hands; warm jackets were handed out and immediately put on and zipped up; gloves went onto hands; and people took off their battered shoes and put on warm socks. And as I looked at them, met their eyes, and touched their hands, I was no longer scared, but deeply humbled by their warmth and humanity. I was suddenly embarrassed by the fearful thoughts I had had about them for years. Other than the births of my children, it was probably one of the most important nights of my life.

I had already learned a hard lesson, that no matter how "comfortable" we are in life, whatever our "station" or "rank" appears to be, however "safe" we want to believe ourselves, we aren't. We are right out there in the front row of life's storms, whoever we are, and whatever we have. I had lost my so-much-beloved, precious son, my sweet boy, and then a husband whom I also loved. I had learned firsthand that tragedy and disappointment can strike any of us at any time. For me, right then, it didn't get worse than that. Other things happen to people--catastrophic illness, tragedies, whole families die in fires whether you are rich or poor, road accidents claim high school students who have families who love them--and these people I was handing sleeping bags to had wound up on the streets. So how safe are any of us? We just aren't. Bad things happen to good people all the time. The phrase "There but for the grace of God go I" never seemed truer to me than that night. And as we handed out sleeping bags and jackets, I couldn't help thinking how proud Nick would have been of me--I who had so often shrunk beside him when he reached out to some homeless person with a hot meal, who had pursed my lips and told him he shouldn't hug them because he might get a disease. God forgive me. What a different world I walked into that night.

Users Review

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