

On Wings of Hope

On Easter Sunday night, with the media full of the Kosovo crisis, fourteen year old Amanda Ralph had an idea. She relayed her thoughts to her friend, Alex, who got on the phone to another friend: 'Hey, Michelle, Amanda has got this really weird idea.' Weird or not, they were right behind it.

Within a week, Amanda's idea had become the 'Wings of Hope' project. Radio stations were running with the story of a young girl's plan to fill a plane with clothes, food and medical supplies and fly it to the people of Kosovo. Amanda and her friends were contacting airlines and appealing to the public and the business community who generously donated supplies. Amanda's family and school got behind the project. The school hall became a warehouse. Students, staff and other volunteers worked tirelessly, sorting, packing and labelling boxes. Collection points were set up interstate. The final count: 780 large boxes of clothing, 160 boxes of food, 500 boxes of personal hygiene items, 30 boxes of bottled water.

There were some glitches. Not everything went to plan. The pressure on Amanda and her family and friends was at times stressful. Yet, for Amanda, negotiating the difficult patches gave her a new awareness of God. 'There's no way all this could have happened without God's help,' she says. 'I remember

one day when it all seemed too hard. I bawled my eyes out and I thought: "No, I can't do this." But a close friend of mine said: "Yes, you can. I'll pray for you." Her words meant a lot to me and over the weeks I saw that prayer really does have an impact.'

Ironically, just as the whole project seemed to be a success, Amanda received news of her greatest setback: due to Albanian government restrictions the supplies would not be allowed to reach their destination. The Australian government stepped in, buying the goods for \$25,000 - funds which would go to the Kosovo refugees via Caritas relief agency. And so a setback was turned into an opportunity. The end result of 'Wings of Hope' is that two groups will have benefited from Amanda's dream: \$25,000 donated to overseas refugee aid and truckloads of goods distributed to needy people in Australia.

As I chat with Amanda and draw strength from her youthful initiative, I am also tuning in to the atmosphere of her family home. Our conversation is delightfully punctuated by the comings and goings of her brothers and sisters (Amanda is one of six). At one point her littlest sister climbs onto her lap, tearfully accusing the cat of scratching her. Amanda assuages the pain with soothing words and cuddles. Another sister calls out to her from the next room with the latest news on peace talks in Yugoslavia. 'That's Cass, my older sister,' explains Amanda. 'She and

I used to fight a lot, but she's one of the people who has helped me the most in Wings of Hope.'

In listening to Amanda speak of her project, I am hearing other things as well. I am sensing the nurturing space within which such dreams dare to arise, the kind of relationships from which compassion and mission spring. This is a home that exudes life and energy; where people come first and things are bound to happen. It is a place where marital love empowers, where parental guidance inspires, where brothers and sisters love and fight and shed tears and lift each other up. Whether it's healing a child's cat scratch or responding to a refugee crisis, the love source is the same. It's the kind of love that changes the world. •

