



The Cop Who Spreads Sunshine

BY JOSEPH P. BLANK

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By making inspiring reality of his own impossible dream, Philadelphia policeman Bill Sample has made dreams come true for hundreds of critically ill children



FOR SIX YEARS William Sample, a 40-year-old police officer, had been assigned to protective duty at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children in Philadelphia. Among the patients were a large number of chronically or terminally ill children, suffering from such afflictions as cancer, cystic fibrosis

and kidney disease. Over the years, Sample came to know many of the children and, as well, families who had been drained financially and emotionally. He wished constantly that he could do something to ease their suffering.

Then, one evening in October 1976, a dream of an idea occurred to

him. "Every one of these kids must have some special wish," he said to his fiancée, Helene, who was assistant personnel manager at the hospital. "I can't do anything to make them physically better. But maybe I can help make some of their dreams come true."

Helene let the idea seep in for a minute. "Let's do it," she said.

They called nine people, men and women who cared greatly about children, to a meeting. Bill's enthusiasm was contagious, and soon the others eagerly offered to join the project. What to call it? "How about 'Sunshine'?" someone suggested. "Because we'll be putting a little sunshine into children's lives." Applause. Agreement.

"That's it, then," Bill said. "'The Sunshine Foundation.'"

In January 1977, Sunshine cast its first ray when the cheerful, round-faced cop—scarcely anybody's idea of a fairy godmother—found five-year-old Bobby, who was dying of leukemia, sitting in St. Christopher's waiting room with his parents. Bill asked Bobby what he would like to do or have above anything else. Bobby said he didn't know. But a nurse had told Bill that the boy yearned to play in the snow.

"How about a weekend at a resort hotel in the Pocono Mountains?" he asked. "Everybody goes. You, your sister and brother, your folks. Sound good?"

Bobby nodded. Bill looked at the parents, and they nodded too. But

the expressions on their faces told him that they weren't sure what they were encountering.

At this point Sunshine was still penniless, so Bill sent the Pocono hotel a personal check to cover the reservation for Bobby and his family. Bill, Helene and several Sunshine volunteers decided to go too. "We didn't want to be nosy," Bill explains. "But we wanted to see if we were doing the right thing. Was Sunshine worthwhile? Did it matter?"

It mattered. "Bobby rode the snowmobile and toboggan, and even skied," Bill recalls. "His father said he showed more energy than he had in a year. In the excitement of enjoying himself, he grew less aware of his pain. For a few days the horror in the lives of this family retreated a little."

Several days later Bobby's mother telephoned Bill: "We'll never forget the weekend, never forget what you did for Bobby, never forget you."

That weekend determined the new course of Bill's life. But making dreams come true costs money, and none of the Sunshiners had a feasible fund-raising idea. They had tried bingo, with Bill borrowing \$2300 from a bank to rent a hall and provide prizes. Bill and his Sunshiners, however, could not compete with Philadelphia's professionally run bingo tournaments.

By May 1977 Bill had personally borrowed \$4500 on behalf of Sunshine. Although an unquenchable

optimist, he could see his wonderful idea winding up as a pipe dream.

Then, when his gloom was deepest, publicity by a Philadelphia newspaper columnist and Bill's appearances on local radio shows began attracting a rising flow of small donations. By 1978 Sunshine had some 30 volunteers. They sold raffle tickets, cookbooks and cakes, ran dances, flea markets and fashion shows.

Soon there was enough money for Bill to rent an apartment near the beach at Ocean City, N.J. That summer ten families spent a week each at the beach, and for the first time in their lives some sick kids played in the sand and sat on the shore with the sea lapping at their legs.

In 1978 the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania gave the Sunshine Foundation the first of three annual \$25,000 grants. Vastly encouraged, Bill enlisted staff members at St. Christopher's and Children's Hospital in the search for unfulfilled dreams, and sent letters to children's hospitals in every other major American city. Responses came from all over the country, and they have kept coming in increasing numbers each year since.

A girl in Oregon wants a pony. A little boy in Illinois dreams of sitting on the deck of a houseboat as it eases down the Mississippi. An Indiana girl would love to touch a California redwood.

No wish has ever been denied.

An Oklahoma girl yearned to visit relatives in California, but was too sick to travel. So Sunshine flew the California family to Oklahoma. A computer went to a New Jersey boy confined to a wheelchair and unable to speak. He now uses the computer to "talk" with his family.

Sometimes a Sunshine Foundation effort to grant a wish inspires a community response. A couple in West Virginia wrote that their leukemic daughter, who shared with them the only bedroom in their small cottage, wanted a room of her own more than anything else. Sunshine had a local building-supply company deliver needed materials—and friends and neighbors helped the girl's father build the additional room.

Many parents are understandably reluctant to ask for "charity"—or simply don't believe Sunshine is for real. In these instances Sunshine frequently learns of the child's plight from someone connected with the family.

A friend wrote about 13-year-old Sam, who had a rare malignancy of the spine and was not given much hope for recovery. His great wish was to sit in the stands at the 1982 Super Bowl game in Pontiac, Mich.

Sunshine telephoned the family and told the mother that her son's dream would be fulfilled. "I don't really believe this is happening," she exclaimed.

It was the end of December and

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the Super Bowl game would be played on January 24. The stadium was sold out. Sunshine telephoned the executive offices of the Philadelphia Eagles and requested, with an explanation, five tickets from the team's allotment. The answer was a quick yes.

The news was telephoned to Sam. "Am I really going?" he asked, breaking into tears. "I can't believe it."

The Super Bowl game thrilled Sam—and so did the autograph given him by victorious San Francisco Forty Niner quarterback Joe Montana. The family wrote, "Words are sometimes hard to find when you are trying to say thank you for something so priceless as love and kindness."

Occasionally, physicians appeal to Sunshine. An Ohio doctor wrote about his patient Gary, a 12-year-old with congenital heart disease. "He has been ill all his life and I doubt that he will live another year. At present, he can hardly walk 50 yards without becoming short of breath and exhausted. Like all children, he dreams of going to Disney World. But his parents cannot afford it. They live in near poverty."

Sunshine made the necessary arrangements for Gary's trip and, once again, dream became reality. Upon the family's return from Disney World, the doctor reported: "A truly miraculous thing has happened. I don't have any way medically to explain it. Gary made a tremendous gain in physical endur-

ance and was able to navigate easily over his five-day stay in Florida. His breathing was unlabored all during the trip. I can only assume that the climate was responsible for his well-being. His father is going back to Florida to look for a job. This may be one case in which the Sunshine Foundation has been able to prolong a life as well as make a child's dream come true."

The family *did* move to Florida and later told the doctor Gary was doing very well.

Another doctor wrote to Sunshine about Susanne, who had "severe burn scars on her face, scalp and body. She has had 20 hospitalizations with numerous surgeries for plastic repairs. She will survive, but will be disfigured."

The mother, divorced and living on a bare survival income, had no telephone. Pride prevented her from answering several Sunshine letters. The doctor finally persuaded her to reply.

She told the Samples, "Susanne and I have done a lot of talking. The one thing she wants is a Barbie doll's remote-control car. She also wants a watch. Anything you can do to help her have a nice Christmas would be appreciated."

With the Foundation short of cash as usual, two Sunshine women borrowed Sample's credit card to go shopping. On Christmas Eve, Bill and a Santa-dressed volunteer packed up the gifts—including Barbie and Ken dolls, an array of outfits for both, the Barbie car

and the watch—and drove to Susanne's apartment. She stared at them in astonishment. "Santa, why haven't you been here before?" she asked. After joyously opening her presents, Susanne led the visitors into the kitchen. "Here, Santa," she said, "I made some cookies for you."

Later, the two men drove to Bill's house, savoring the best Christmas Eve they had ever spent.

To Sunshine, every request is urgent. Several children have died before their dreams could be fulfilled, and others soon after. In November 1981, one mother wrote about her 14-year-old son who the year before had traveled to Florida as a Sunshine guest: "It breaks my heart to tell you that on October 2 we lost Brian to his disease. We are sending you a \$50 check. Brian had a yard sale and raised the money himself. He wanted it to go to you because you gave him one of the most important things of his life—not only the trip to Florida but a new view of people who give so unselfishly of themselves. He never stopped talking about you and his trip."

So far Sunshine has fulfilled more than 600 dreams. The Foundation headquarters has grown from Bill's briefcase to three rooms above a Philadelphia hardware store. There, four dedicated young

women answer the mail and make necessary arrangements. Upon request, they send applications, which include a question about family income, to parents of very sick children. The return of a completed application is followed by a letter to the child's physician, requesting the diagnosis, prognosis, and restrictions, if any, on the child's ability to travel.

The Foundation has no wealthy or corporate supporters that can be counted on for regular contributions, and Bill remains a full-time cop. Although he has enough service time to retire, he can't afford to. "Sunshine is still mostly a nickel-and-dime operation," he says. "Many times we've been desperate for money to give a child his or her wish. But somehow, in the next day or two, the mails have always brought us the money we needed.

"You know," he says, his strong voice dropping to a whisper, "sometimes I have the feeling that the kids whose dreams we've fulfilled and who have since died are seeing to it that we have what we need to help children who need us today."

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, write:
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