

Helping others can be surprisingly easy, since there is so much to be done. The hard part comes in choosing what to do and getting started, making the first effort at something different. Once the initiative is taken we often find that we can do things we never thought we could.

-Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter

Heroes After Hours by David Forward

Continental Airlines' Terri New

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Czechoslovakia is a country with a rich cultural heritage and a rather sad political history. This landlocked country in the very heart of Europe saw the founding of Central Europe's first university, Charles University. Built in 1348, it still operates today. The baroque capital, Prague, is one of the world's most beautiful cities, with cobbled streets, medieval buildings-many dating back to the thirteenth century-and bohemian cafes and coffee houses. In the years between the world wars, Czechoslovakia enjoyed the freedom of democracy. In fact, President Woodrow Wilson invited Thomas Masaryk, the first leader of a democratic Czechoslovakia, to the United States as his guest. While in Washington, Masaryk became particularly fascinated with the history of Thomas Jefferson and the role he played in the formation of a democratic United States of America. In reading Jefferson's history, Masaryk was inspired to write the Czech Declaration of Independence while on his American trip. Since becoming a nation under the iron thumb of the Soviet Union, Czechs have never stopped yearning for the rights and freedoms to which Masaryk-and Jefferson-subscribed.

Terri New's visit to Prague in 1989 was not very pleasant. "I met two East German students who had escaped from their country," she recalls. "I knew something was going on there, and I wanted to witness it." When she arrived, the atmosphere was extremely tense. Czechoslovakia's location, with its long borders with Western countries Germany and Austria, made it a natural transit corridor for disillusioned East Europeans planning to escape from their repressive Communist governments. The wave of discontent among freedom-seeking citizens in Poland, East Germany, the Baltic states, and Hungary had put additional pressure on Czech authorities. "It was really dismal," she says, "especially

for the young people I met. They had no hope for the future. They simply didn't believe the Communist government would ever leave." Given the bloodbath that ensued during the democratic uprising in Czechoslovakia in 1968, it was easy to understand their disbelief that any substantive changes would occur in 1989.

For this gentle, soft-spoken Californian to see tanks and battle-ready troops ringing the city was an experience like none she had ever had. As each train left Prague heading to the West,

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police with high-power fire hoses were at the ready to knock off anybody they saw hiding above or beneath it as it passed by. On November 17, 1989, students who were in a silent march to urge peaceful change were brutalized by the militia. Despite the cruelty the attackers used, the students refused to fight back. One western newspaper report told how young people who had their right arms broken by the soldiers would then continue their march, holding their protest signs with their left hands.

As events in both the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries moved the entire axis toward democratic reform, so the Czechs began to finally believe they might see their dreams come true. Terri tells of the watershed event one night when the populist leader Vaclav Havel, a playwright like her, met with the country's Communist rulers. As Havel negotiated for hours to bring a fast, peaceful transition to democracy, people started to gather outside the building in the magnificent Wenceslas Square. As the talks dragged on, the crowd-and the tension-increased. The army tanks were ready to move in as soon as the word came from the military chiefs in the government building. By evening the crowd had grown to three hundred thousand people, all standing in complete silence. Suddenly, one person took out his keys, symbolic of unlocking a door to freedom, and started jingling them. His neighbor followed suit, then another, and another, until the sound of three hundred thousand sets of keys reverberated through the square and into the government conference room. The ringing continued for hours. There was total silence except for what later became known as the Last Ringing. The crowd outside and Havel's strategies inside finally made their point, and the Communist leaders agreed to relinquish power without a shot being fired. Rita Klimova, the Czechoslovak ambassador to the United States, herself a dissident, called it the Velvet Revolution, a moniker that has since gained worldwide recognition.

Moving from Inspiration to Action

Terri New realized that her life had been changed by the experiences she had witnessed on her trip to Czechoslovakia. Although

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Terri New had gone back to Prague to interview people for her play, but she remembers throughout the long flight home her mind being consumed by the idea of supplying her newfound friends with that which they'd been denied for a generation. "Books?" she recalls thinking, "I can do books!"

Over the next few months, Terri New's life became a blur. When she wasn't flying across the country for Continental, she was writing Voices of the Velvet Revolution and trying to establish her book donation idea. Coming up with the name Project Booklift was the easy part. Getting the books to Prague was not. Continental does not fly there, so New figured on having them fly the shipments to London or Paris. She contacted CSA, the Czech state airline, and they agreed to carry the books to Prague free from London or Paris.

Then came the shocker. Continental's public relations department refused to fly the books to Europe for free. New was desperately disappointed, even angry. Talk to Terri New for more than a couple of minutes and the pride she has in "her" airline is very evident. And now they were turning down her request to bring classical literature and modern business techniques to an entire country. So determined was she to make Project Booklift a reality that she wrote a letter to Continental's then chairman, Frank Lorenzo. This time it worked. Lorenzo gave the project his blessing, and Continental Airlines agreed to fly the donated books to London or Paris at no charge. They even put several middle level managers around the U.S. in touch with Terri to offer their assistance.

Continental's current CEO was a little slower to embrace the idea. "I became aware of Project Booklift in 1990 while a senior vice president for the airline," says Bob Ferguson. "To be honest, my perspective at the time was not very different from that of many employees, which was essentially: why are we getting involved in an effort for a country that was not even on our route map?" But by the time Ferguson had become Continental's CEO in 1991, his opinion had changed. "I started to more fully understand the importance of Terry New's initiative and the critical role of the corporation in encouraging and supporting employee volunteerism," he adds. "Our airline supports employee

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Pursuing a Labor of Love

Collecting and coordinating the book donations were taking almost every waking hour of Terri New's life. "But I didn't think of it as 'giving' on my part," she says. "I really felt it was a labor of love." An apt description considering the many heartwarming personal inscriptions that donors wrote in their books. Terri tells of two particularly poignant messages: One was by the noted author Edward Albee, who sent one of his own works inscribed, "To my friends in Czechoslovakia. Brave, Persistent, Stubborn, Ingenious-and altogether splendid. Signed with deep affection." Continental Airlines' then-president, Hollis Harris, sent a leather-bound edition of Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation with the personal inscription, "To the people of Czechoslovakia, in honor of your great courage, commitment and love of freedom, we at Continental Airlines are proud to have played a role in Project Booklift." It was presented to President Vaclav Havel personally.

By the time Terri was ready to make her third trip to Czechoslovakia-her first for Project Booklift-an incredible forty thousand books had been donated and were ready for delivery. In making the first shipment, Terri was accompanied by some of the flight attendants and managers who had been most supportive of the program. After the exhausting flight from Los Angeles to London, followed by a long wait in transit and then the CSA flight to Prague, the team was ready to crawl into bed and sleep for twenty-four hours. "As I walked off the airplane, I noticed this large crowd of about 150 people who suddenly started moving toward me," recalls Terri. "I suddenly realized, 'Oh my God, they're here for me!' I was shocked."

The airline's employee communications director, wrote an article on Terri and Project Booklift for the flight attendants' magazine that drew a tremendous response from her colleagues around the country-and beyond: Continental's station manager in Montego Bay, Jamaica,

called with books the local staff had collected. "All told, we probably had sixty to one hundred employees actively involved in gathering books in their communities," says Scippa.

The Continental volunteers were ushered into a reception room for an official welcoming ceremony by the large group of Czech dignitaries. President Havel sent his personal representative, and the chancellor of Charles University also attended. A sampling of about three hundred books were displayed on the tables in the reception room, and when the Czech delegation saw the quantity and titles of the books that had been brought, many of them broke into tears. "I couldn't believe how much they cherished those books," says Ray Scippa. "They were oblivious to what else was happening in the room as they pored over them, examining each page as if it were the most valuable thing they'd ever seen." Czechoslovakia's foreign minister, Jiri Dientsbier, told Terri's team, "This is the first concrete evidence that the world cares about us."

Just seven days after Terri New arrived in Prague with forty thousand books, President George Bush arrived to help commemorate the first anniversary of the Velvet Revolution. After writing the Czech Declaration of Independence while in Washington, Thomas Masaryk had never brought it home. During the Communists' rule, U.S. authorities considered it safer to hold on to the original document; but now, more than seventy years after its creation, George Bush the first American president to set foot on Czechoslovakian soil-presented President Vaclav Havel with the original copy of the Declaration, along with a replica of the Liberty Bell.

Terri New was overjoyed at the value her new Czech friends put on the books she brought. "So many of these were probably laying unread and unappreciated on bookshelves and garage floors across America," she says, "and it took so little to do something that means so much to these people." As she returned from Prague, Terri was more convinced than ever that this trip was not the culmination of Project Booklift - it was just the beginning. Her co-workers agreed. "Without exception, every person who went on that trip commented on what a wonderful thing it was for us to be involved in," recalls Ray Scippa.

As news reports of their trip created even greater interest in Project Booklift, the task became an all-consuming interest for Terri.

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She was putting in sixteen-hour days answering calls and letters, arranging transportation, establishing collection drops, conducting media interviews, and driving around to pick up donated books personally. In the midst of this, she moved to Santa Barbara-which meant all the donated books in her garage had to go, too. "I moved forty-five thousand books by myself," the diminutive Terri groans. "Never again!" Finally, in the summer of 1991, she asked Continental for help. Ray Scippa agreed to take care of much of the shipping coordination and public relations work, removing an enormous burden from Terri. "Ray Scippa is one of the heartbeats of Continental's humanitarianism," she declares.

As the fall of 1991 approached, New merged Project Booklift with the Prague Spring Foundation, a Santa Barbara based nonprofit organization. Not only would their experience help Terri's one-person operation, but as a nonprofit, tax-exempt foundation they could help her with grant applications. In November 1991, Terri New flew back to Prague with sixty thousand books. Once again she was received with deep gratitude and affection by Czech dignitaries. "It was amazing how much things had changed in just two years," she says. "The people now are joyous. The coffee houses that are such a part of Prague's bohemian culture are full, and people have vision and hope and a real belief in the future."

Project Booklift was becoming too successful. Getting sixty thousand books across the Atlantic on Continental's big Boeing 747s might have to be spread over two or three days. But from London and Paris, CSA flew only short-range, narrow-body aircraft with minimal cargo capacity. What little freight space they had was usually taken by revenue-producing cargo shipments, meaning it might take weeks to complete the transfer of sixty thousand books from their European gateway to Prague. Terri started planning her next shipment for June 1992, and she realized she must now find a better way to transport the books on their final leg. The most cost-effective method was by truck, and New applied for-and received-a grant from the United States Information Agency for the cost to truck future shipments from Paris to Czechoslovakia.

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Books continued to pour in from numerous sources around the country: Friends of the Library from Ventura County, California; overstocked bookstores in Pittsburgh and Seattle; and her motivated co-workers at Continental's stations across the U.S. "Just as I think I have a count on the current number of books," Terri laughs, "I'll get calls from Continental employees saying, 'We've got 6,000 in Newark, 5,500 in Houston; and 4,000 in Denver.'" Richard Lisser, the airline's vice president in charge of Continental's huge Newark, New Jersey, hub, says, "Project Booklift has touched the hearts and minds of our local employees. The response extends from the lunchroom to the departure gates. Our local staff have truly rallied around this cause." In June 1992, Terri headed back to Czechoslovakia with an incredible shipment: one hundred thousand books. This time she also took her concert with her, performing the stories and songs from Voices of the Velvet Revolution to the very audiences who were her inspiration for the play back in 1989. Joining her in the cast was James Ragan, an American poet of Slovak descent who has been nominated for a Nobel Prize for his poetry.

She has asked that the books be distributed fairly throughout the country, and she was invited to the town of Pizek during the trip to witness the opening of the first English-language library. When she arrived in Pizek, Terri found the citizens waiting in the streets to greet her as if she were a foreign dignitary. She soon found out why they were so excited about her visit: to the people of Pizek, Terri New had done more for them than any visitor their village had ever known, and they had written a play in her honor. So that she would understand it, the performance was in English; they had worked on it for two years. As the children spoke the lines in perfect English it was Terri's turn to fight back tears. "It was such a beautiful evening of shared artistry," she says.

On January 1, 1993, Czechoslovakia ceased to exist, being replaced by two independent countries: the Czech Republic and the Republic of Slovakia. The transformation to democratic rule and free-market economies is going well, and outsiders credit the indomitable spirit of the citizenry for the progress. At the same time, Project Booklift continues. Its books are in the libraries of tiny rural villages such as Pizek and in big-city centers of academia like Prague's Charles University.

I want you to share your food with the hungry and bring into your own homes those who are helpless, poor and destitute.

Clothe those who are cold and don't hide from relatives who need help.

If you do these things, God will shed His own glorious light upon you.

He will heal you; your godliness will lead you forward,
and goodness will be a shield before you, and the glory of the Lord will protect you from behind.

-Isaiah 58: 7-8

I have a very special daughter!
She shared the vision with me of
creating Project Booklift and I
could not have done it without
her. At a time in life when Guess
jeans and LA Gear shoes were so
important she made a lot of
sacrifices to make much good
happen for many people.

– Terri New

“Ms. New, has a history of producing a unique blend of Arts & Activism, starting with Project Booklift, a nationwide project which airlifted 400,000 books to the new democracies of Eastern Europe. New was awarded the Santa Barbara Woman of the Year for 1995 and the Soroptimist’s Woman of Distinction in Los Angeles and Santa Barbara in 1993. In David Forward’s book “Heroes After Hours” in which she is featured, she is described as a woman “who makes things happen.” Creator/Producer of many national and international projects, she has been producing many different kind of artistic projects for 20 years. As a playwright, in 1990 she wrote and produced Voices of the Velvet Revolution at the Wilshire Ebel Theater. In 1991 she created a documentary “Rebirth of a Nation,” and associate-produced this with KEYT, this won the Golden Mike Award for best documentary.”