

Second Helpings

By Jean Hanff Korelitz
Real Simple Magazine
August 2002 Issue

Not every simple idea is a brilliant idea, but every brilliant idea is, at its core, a simple one. The brilliant idea that occurred to Washington, D.C., doctor Amy Kossoff and her friends was so simple that it still makes her beam with pride, two years after it took shape during a birthday dinner.

Amy, a petite 47-year-old with tight brown-and-gray curls and an extravagant grin, is a California native who has lived most of her adult life in the capital, first attending medical school and then working in a hospital, homeless shelters, and public clinics. She takes immense satisfaction in her work, but it has also brought some intense frustrations.

One is that patients routinely find it difficult to leave the shelters or establish independent lives because of relatively small financial stumbling blocks: A 10-year-old delinquent utility bill might disqualify someone for subsidized housing. Lacking a few bucks for a co-payment might stop a patient from getting her prescription. A slender shortfall in rent money might mean eviction.

For years Amy's solution was to write checks from her personal account - \$50 to help with the rent or \$5 for the prescription or even \$3 to pay a child's field-trip expenses. She had probably given away close to \$10,000 over the years, and she was bemoaning this to a group of friends one night in January 2000. One more \$25 check to Pepco, a local utility, and her husband, Rob, would probably divorce her, Amy said.

Lisa Herrick then made a catalytic suggestion. Lisa, a clinical psychologist, throws regular potluck suppers for her women friends. Why not ask potluck participants to bring a donation as well as a dish?

The group decided on a suggested donation of \$35. ("Thirty-five is about what we would spend on a dinner out, so that felt right," says Amy.) Anne Wallace, a community counselor, persuaded Chevy Chase Bank to give them a fee-free checking account. And Lisa Herrick dreamed up a name for their endeavor-- literally . "I woke up with this phrase in my head," she says now, still clearly delighted. "If you have lemons, make lemonade. If you have women, make Womenade."

Thus Washington Womenade was born. It held its first potluck supper at Amy's house in March 2001. Nearly 100 women crowded into the downstairs rooms of her large renovated farmhouse in the suburb of Chevy Chase, Maryland, bearing both dishes and checks, and left behind a generous \$3,000, plus plenty of food for Rob and their kids. By March of this year, all the money had been dispersed in small amounts to her patients' landlords, utility companies, and insurance companies, so another dinner was required. This time many more women congregated, and the bank account broke \$5,000.

Amy and Washington Womenade have an idea that's particularly relevant these days. Charitable giving is on the rise, but administrative costs and payout plans are coming under increased scrutiny. A "direct" charity like Womenade is a response to the times, as well as a reflection of who Amy Kossoff is.

One of the biggest surprises in Amy Kussoff's life was becoming a doctor in the first place. She was on her way to a degree in botany at the University of California at Santa Barbara when she realized there was something about medicine that drew her in. "It combined both my skills and my loves," she says now of the mix of science and humanity. After medical school at George Washington University, she did her residency, and soon after she met Rob Enelow, a fellow physician originally from New Orleans.

"She made me call her Dr. Kossoff," says Rob, who married Amy in 1986. Rob went to establish a private practice as an internist in a Virginia suburb. ("Someone has to pay this mortgage," Amy says, laughing.) They now share their home with their three young children - Nat, 10, Leah, 7, and Molly, 3 - and their three dogs, who, Amy says, "more or less run the household."

On the day of Womenade's most recent potluck, Amy's morning looks similar to any suburban mom's: She does a frantic search for Molly's "crazy tights," tests Nat on his spelling words, and tries to persuade Leah to eat something. She then doles out treats for the dogs and drops the kids off at their Montessori and nursery schools in the family van.

After this, however, Amy turns into seriously non-suburban territory. She leaves affluent Chevy Chase and drives to one of D.C.'s poorest neighborhoods, to the House of Ruth, a shelter for homeless women. Her examining room looks rudimentary, but Amy insists she has everything she needs. Indeed, much of what she does is simply listen, an undervalued medical skill, she believes. "So many of my patients have never had anyone actually sit down and listen to them," she says.

This morning most of Amy's patients need renewals of their prescriptions, many of which are for antidepressants or antipsychotics. Amy is understanding but not a total softie - she is sharp when she needs to be. She nags all her patients about getting an annual Pap smear, and dresses down Mary, who has failed to make a follow-up appointment. (Names have been changed.) Mary, admonished, is appreciative, nonetheless. "She's a good woman," she says of Amy. "She has a patience with her. She might have somewhere to go, I might be taking her off her schedule, but she sees me."

Amy's last patient of the day is one of her favorites. "Every Tuesday, Linda would be in withdrawal and throwing up when I saw her," Amy says. "Now she's drug-free and she has a job working with mentally retarded people. I hardly see her anymore. But I'm always really happy when I do." She grins. Linda asks Amy about a hepatitis B vaccine, gets a standard Pap smear reminder, and discusses her allergies. Then she stands up and gives Amy a hug. "This is my doctor!" she says, enveloping Amy in her arms.

For someone who's soon to have a horde of hungry women invading her home, Amy looks pretty calm. She stops on her way home to pick up flowers and water for the potluck. A few blocks from her house, Amy points to a man mowing the lawn. "There's Dan. He's a patient." For Dan, a day laborer who works odd jobs in the summer, winter means scarce work and diminished income, and some months ago he mentioned during an appointment that he was about to become homeless. Amy paid \$200 in Womenade funds to his landlady so that he could remain in his room until jobs picked up again.

One check. One life. These small steps, a point that's easily made when you open Womenade's checkbook and run your eyes down the right-hand column: \$14.85, \$770.46, \$36.56, \$62.13, \$115.65, \$11.59. No one's arguing that Amy and her friends are changing the world here, least of all Amy. The problem of homelessness is not going to be solved by Dan's ability to hang on through the winter (though it will certainly be a big help to Dan).

Amy is always happy to arrive at her own home. The house, built in 1882, is among the oldest in Chevy Chase. When Amy and Rob bought the place in 1999, it lacked heat on the third floor and boasted a 1960s kitchen. The renovations lasted nearly a year, prolonged by such happy events as the adoption of Molly (who arrived from Korea at the age of seven months), and such sad ones as the sudden death of Amy's father. Now it retains its Victorian bones but sports a very un-Victorian openness, with intense colors, witty folk art, and a kitchen dominated by the stove that once served in Amy's parents' kitchen, in California.

"Sometimes I come home and I think, this is just ridiculous," Amy says. "Because I have this wonderful job where I get to help people, and then I get to come back to this wonderful house with my family. I'm reminded how lucky I am every single day."

Amy checks in with the children, reminding Nat to practice the piano and admiring Molly's drawing. Then she puts the flowers in vases, stacks the paper plates, and dashes upstairs for a shower.

Soon old friends and strangers alike start arriving. Women greet one another with kisses and handshakes, and introductions are made as the table begins to fill with contributions. The women relish the sense that they are helping directly, and that Amy regularly reports back to them about the people the fund has assisted. Ruth Robbins, a full-time mom, says, "We all want to make contributions, but when you give your money to a charitable organization, where does that donation go? How much of it really helps people? Through Amy, a need is identified and it's taken care of." And with no overhead at all, every penny reaches its goal.

With the crowd at critical mass, attention inevitably shifts toward the dining room. At this point, it's almost possible to forget how much good this party is doing, given how good this party is tasting. A lone man soon infiltrates the festivities. But this particular man's presence is tolerated, since he lives here.

When Amy told her husband about the Womenade project, he was skeptical. “That’s my nature,” Rob says, smiling over a very full plate. “But I changed by mind after they had the first fund-raiser here and I saw a huge number of people with checkbooks in hand.” Rob’s major concern was that the women would attempt to form a nonprofit organization and then have to document every nickel and dime of donations and expenditures. “It would have just killed it,” he says, sampling Tai tofu-and-peanut dish. “It would have killed Amy with paperwork. And it would have taken the fun out of it, too.”

In Washington as elsewhere, Rob says, many charity fund-raisers are largely concerned with the egos of those involved—who’s on the planning committee, who gets her name on the invitation. “It’s more about pride than about fund-raising. But this is a friends thing, not an ego thing.” Then he nods at the dining room table, barely visible through the crowd of women. “And the leftovers are great.”

How to Make Womenade

1. Find a point person, a connector, an Amy. Talk to your local homeless shelter or battered-women’s shelter to find someone who works individually with clients, knows about their needs, and is trustworthy and willing to dispense funds. You might also find such a person among employees or volunteers at soup kitchens, public child-care centers, social-service centers, or a family court.
2. Start with a core group, and have everybody invite 10 people. If five friends invite 10 friends each and everyone drops \$35 into the pot, that’s \$1,925. And a great party.
3. Share the chores. Anne Wallace did the paperwork for the account, Amy provided the house, Naomi Karp was in charge of nametags, and Caroline Newman brought the wine, having persuaded a local merchant to provide it at a discount. And, of course, everyone cooked.
4. Need a name? Washington Womenade members want to see their idea sprout around the country, so if you would like to establish a Your Town Womenade, go right ahead. Think of it as a nice, tall glass of Womenade to go.