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## On the Spot: What you give is what you get

Thursday, May 21, 2009 at 12:00am

By Vincent Troia

We can give people a hard time rather easily, but we can't seem to give to people going through hard times. We give hefty tips to Fourbucks barristers for whipping up our latte, but we don't give the same coin to homeless bench-sitters.

Hey, it's not necessary to mention that there are plenty of philanthropic people among us — those who donate time and money, tithe for their churches, buy a gazillion boxes of Girl Scout cookies every year.

But I want to speak to those who have trouble parting with their cash, those who after buying food and paying bills think they need a little something for themselves, or those who tell themselves they'd like to give more, but it would mean giving something up — like Netflix, or their 'Y' membership, or all those premium movie channels, or those Friday night beer fests.

People like me.

Being spoiled for so long can really cloud your vision, which is why *Time* magazine's recent "The End of Excess" cover piece was such a long-overdue wakeup call. Even the lead sentence was classic: "Don't pretend we didn't see this coming for a long, long time."

But we did pretend. We still do.

The *Time* piece basically showed that in the early 1980s, "around the time Ronald Reagan became President and Wall Street's great modern bull market began, we

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started gambling and thinking magically." By 2007, the median price of a new American home had quadrupled, the Dow shot from 803 in the summer of 1982 to 14,165 in the fall of 2007, and the share of disposable income "that each household spent servicing its mortgage and consumer debt increased 35 percent."

However, the numbers that really smacked me awake were these: In 1982, the average household saved 11 percent of its disposable income; by 2007 it was less than 1 percent.

If we don't save, what do we have to give?

When friends and family push us to sponsor walks and runs for noble causes, we tend to give in and make a pledge. My wife and I did that for several years with an old colleague who runs marathons for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society. Notice the word "did."

Now there was something about the connection of the familiar face and unknown victims of the disease that made the donation easier. Maybe that's the effect celebrities have on these charities and fundraisers — if Oprah's giving then we all should, too. But not every charity has a Michael J. Fox, Angelina Jolie or the late Christopher Reeve as a spokesperson or a "poster child."

Cynthia Hester has founded one of those charities, the Tennessee chapter of the Children's Tumor Foundation, a group that supports families with Neurofibromatosis [NF] sufferers. Her son, Noah, has NF, a genetic disorder that causes tumors to form on nerves anywhere in the body, including the brain and spinal cord. Since his diagnosis Noah has had two strokes and several surgeries to remove tumors on his face. He has a lesion on his brain stem as well as stroke complications and learning differences.

Now Hester does not have Jolie on speed-dial. She is working to raise awareness of, and money for, a disease which affects one in every 3,000 births that most people don't know or can't pronounce. But I'm drawn to her and Noah's call because they are familiar faces.

Back when *The City Paper* published five times a week, Cynthia worked part-time as a page designer. When my tenure started, Cynthia met me at her home where she did virtually all her work for the paper. Within minutes, it became apparent why that was the case as Noah bounced into the room.

A bright and happy kid, he was Hester's full-time job, and while she eventually stopped



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working for *The City Paper*, she found a greater challenge — and opportunity.

Students at Noah's school, J.T. Moore Middle, are walking to raise money for NF today. Since May is National Neurofibromatosis Month, the students have been learning about it all month and are doing a favor for their friend and 8th-grade classmate.

And I'm learning something too. I'm helping Noah's classmates help Noah and NF. You can too at [www.active.com/donate/jtmoorenfwalk](http://www.active.com/donate/jtmoorenfwalk) but I'm not Oprah, so don't feel obligated.

I'm doing it because the act of giving always manages to give something back. And when we're spoiled, we tend to forget that.

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Technorati

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