

HOLIDAY FARE: INSPIRED GIFTS, COOL EVENTS, AND LOTS OF HOT CHOCOLATE

# New York family

December 2006

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Soledad O'Brien  
joined by five  
friends from the  
Pajama Program.

## The Gift Of Giving

CNN's Soledad O'Brien And 20 Other Generous New Yorkers  
Share Their Passion For Their Favorite Charities

ESSAY: "CREATING A TIME CAPSULE WITH MY DAUGHTER"





Soledad with  
her Pajama  
Program friends

# Giving Back

BY  
LEAH  
BLACK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
SARAH MERIANS

SOLEDAD  
O'BRIEN  
ON THE  
IMPORTANCE  
OF BEING  
CHARITABLE

Most people know Soledad O'Brien as the news anchor on CNN's show "American Morning." But this globetrotting reporter is also a busy mom who lives in Chelsea with her husband and four kids. Despite her hectic schedule - which includes waking up before dawn to get to the studios and later picking up her kids from school - O'Brien makes time for charitable work she believes in like supporting the Pajama Program (featured on cover), which provides new pajamas and books to needy children.



**W**hat first sparked your interest in the Pajama Program?

I love being involved with charities when I feel that what I'm contributing isn't just, "Oh, here's a check," but that I'm really helping someone. The founder of the Pajama Program, Genevieve Piturro, physically, personally does so much and is very hands on, number one, but also makes sure that all the money is really going to help the kids who need it and in a very specific way – getting them books and pajamas. I loved her vision. For that reason I was happy to sign on and do my teeny weeny little part.

What lessons have you learned from the work you've done with the program?

I think the biggest lesson is that sometimes it's easy to feel very overwhelmed by all the need in this day and age – about poverty and AIDS and Hurricane Katrina relief and tsunami relief and the earthquake in Pakistan. But just helping a little bit at a time can grow into having an enormous impact.

How old are your children? Do you ever volunteer together as a family?

My daughters are 6 and 4 and the boys are 2. My daughters are very much involved with Hearts of Gold, which helps some of the kids who are in homeless shelters in our neighborhood. They come to the fundraiser every year, and it goes a little bit late, but next year they're going to be old enough to help volunteer, which means they'll be handing out programs to people.

Has your work as a journalist covering events around the world, from earthquakes to Hurricane Katrina, impacted your desire to get involved with certain causes?

I definitely have this sense of immediacy. I want problems fixed immediately and I also can see how they can be fixed. We run around and report on when people are not doing their job. So sometimes I feel like, "Wow, if you could just get x number of dollars to this problem...you know sometimes you can fix a problem by throwing money at it. A lot of times. So I guess again you see that reflected in the volunteer work my husband Brad and I do. We work with people who take on projects and work to solve them. They're goal is to get in, fix it, do x, y and z, and often very much of their own doing with their own money and their own time.

Did you have role models growing up that helped teach you the importance of giving back to society?

I'm from a very Catholic family and my mother was very much into the church as being a way to help poor people and combat poverty. I think my parents' general mission was whatever you're doing be a doer, be someone who fixes the problem, don't sit around and just talk about it or complain about it, which is even worse – just do it.

Do you let your children watch you on TV?

Yeah they watch all the time. And sometimes it's hard; they have very specific questions. My daughter is very interested in knowing if babies died in Hurricane Katrina. A lot of it they don't understand, they're so little, they really don't get it.

When I was growing up we weren't allowed to watch a lot of TV but we could watch as much news as we wanted. And I love the news as long as you're open and sort of sitting around and talking about the issues. I find it a jumping off point for certain things.

In your mind what are the pros to raising kids in New York?

The pros are a million pros. I love going to the American Museum of Natural History or the Museum of Modern Art. That's your backyard. I love that you get to meet all different kinds of people – you don't have to go out of your way to find real variation whether you're talking about bringing your kids to the office one day, or walking down the street, or in your building.

You mentioned your daughter watched some of your coverage of Hurricane Katrina – did you learn any important lessons there that you've also tried to pass down to your kids?

You spend a week covering folks who are struggling a lot in New Orleans and you are brought right back down to, "Oh yes, thank you God. I remember to be grateful for all that I'm given." I hope I convey that sentiment to my children as well. I think it's really important that children understand that they're part of a bigger community. Sometimes that community is our neighborhood of Chelsea, sometimes that community is their school community, sometimes that community is the city of New York and sometimes that community is the country or the world. And to understand that we have a responsibility to help people. For instance my girlfriend who runs the homeless shelter Hearts of Gold recently called to say, "There's a homeless family here who doesn't have any groceries." And I said, "Well oh my gosh just get some groceries and bill it to us." And my daughter said, well why don't they just go to Gristedes and get groceries? It never crossed her mind that there are people who open a cabinet and there is no food inside. I think that's a really good lesson for a 6-year-old to learn. I think 4 is a little too young for that, but 6 is not.

Do you find that New York is a giving city?

Oh god yes. I think that the idea that people who live in Manhattan are unpleasant and rude and whatever – I just think they're all busy. I cannot tell you the number of times I've taken a double stroller down the subway and had three people stop and help me carry that heavy thing down. Yeah, every so often some crazy person screams at you. But for the most part I'm grateful to live here. It's a beautiful city, it's a loving city. It really is. ♦



# What's Your Favorite Charity?

## YOUR CHOICES AND OURS

**BAIN ANTELL**, director of NYC flagship DKNY: My favorite charity is the Kellner Family Pediatric Liver Disease Foundation. Samantha Kellner's second child, Raphael, was diagnosed with a life-threatening disease called biliary atresia and had a liver transplant at 6-months old. He is now a happy 3-year-old attending pre-school. Their foundation raises money to benefit the Liver Transplant Program for kids, funding research, and creating a place that is conducive to kids at a hospital. (Kellner Family Pediatric Liver Disease Foundation, 212-620-2682, [www.kellnerliverfoundation.org](http://www.kellnerliverfoundation.org))

**JENNIFER APPEL**, director, Buttercup Bakery: I support many organizations that offer services to children, and Ronald McDonald House is a stellar organization, bringing a wonderful range of services to families in need of help at a critical time in their lives. (Ronald McDonald House of NY, [www.rmdh.org](http://www.rmdh.org))

**SILLY BILLY**, children's entertainer and clown: ComedyCures. We do shows for kids in hospitals. They're laughing for the hour of the show, and not thinking about the illness, and they have good memories and will think about it afterwards. (ComedyCures Foundation, 201-227-8410, [www.comedycures.org](http://www.comedycures.org))



**DOUG BLONSKY**, president of the Central Park Conservancy: I love The Friends of Webster Library, which runs a used and rare bookshop. It's a neighborhood gem and an asset for the school that is across the street. In addition, the money raised from the store goes to underfunded libraries around the city. (Friends of Webster Library, 212-288-5049, [www.websterlibrary.org](http://www.websterlibrary.org))

**MONICA BLUM**, president of Lincoln Square Business Improvement District: We have worked with Goddard Riverside Community Center for ten years: The organization provides training, employment and supportive services to formerly homeless mentally ill individuals and it is these individuals who help make Lincoln Square cleaner!

(Goddard Riverside Community Center, 212-873-6600, [www.goddard.org](http://www.goddard.org))

**SAMUEL FREEDMAN**, New York Times education columnist: I'd list two favorite charities, American Jewish World Service and the Koby Mandell Foundation. Both, in different ways, embody the value Judaism places not just on charity (*tzedakah*) but on healing the world (*tikkun olam*). AJWS sends young Jewish volunteers, Peace Corps-style, into the developing world. The Koby Mandell Foundation, founded by the parents of an Israeli boy murdered during the second intifada, operates a summer camp for kids who have lost a family member in terrorist attacks. (American Jewish World Service, 212-792-2900, [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org); Koby Mandell Foundation, 301-654-7045, [www.kobymandell.org](http://www.kobymandell.org))

## Pajama Program

Putting on pajamas, brushing their teeth, and snuggling up for a goodnight story are evening rituals most kids don't think twice about. But there are many children whose bedtimes aren't so carefree.

The Pajama Program is a charity whose mission it is to provide new, warm pajamas and books to underprivileged youth in major cities in the U.S. and around the world. Many of the children it benefits have been abandoned, abused, and deprived of any love at all. "Bed time is a vulnerable time of day - they're alone, it's dark, it's frightening and it's colder," says the program's executive director, Genevieve Pitarro. "It's a way of giving them hope that someone cares."

So far the program has donated close to 75,000 pairs of pajamas, which it received from people and manufacturers around the country. Energetic volunteers organize pajama drives and box up pajamas to be sent to organizations which can distribute them. Some even reach needy children as far away as Bosnia, Brazil and the Ukraine.

Pitarro has even higher hopes for the future. "I would like a manufacturer or two to help us organize a way to send pajamas where they are needed. That would be a phenomenal way to work this program," she says. "It is one little piece of clothing that means so much."

To find out more about the Pajama Program, call 212-71-MYPJS or visit [www.pajamaprogram.org](http://www.pajamaprogram.org).

—By Laura Kenny

family  
pick



**COZY FRIEDMAN**, owner of *Cozy's Cuts For Kids: The Eugene Zitwer Foundation*, also known as *The Uncle Yuddy Fund*. It brings love and cheer to seriously ill children in hospitals by providing entertainment, toys, and special events during times of need. It also refurbishes pediatric playrooms, and provides funds for medical procedures and holiday programs. (*The Eugene Zitwer Foundation*, 718-522-3550)

**RISA GOLDBERG**, co-founder of *Big City Moms: Autism Speaks*. Several of the moms in our organization have children with autism and the number of children seems to be increasing year after year. To help learn more about autism, *Big City Moms* donates a portion of the proceeds from various events to *Autism Speaks* every year. (*Autism Speaks*, 212-252-8584, [www.autismspeaks.org](http://www.autismspeaks.org))

**GRAHAM HILL**, founder, *treehugger.com*: "I like Heifer International [whose goal is to help end world hunger and poverty through self-reliance & sustainability]. It's a smart approach: give people something that grows even more valuable over time and require them to share some of this with their community. (*Heifer International*, 800-422-0474, [www.heifer.org](http://www.heifer.org))

## New York City Coalition Against Hunger

Joel Berg challenges people to think differently about the face of poverty in New York City. "People equate homelessness with hunger – they visualize people begging in the streets," he says. "But hunger in New York is not just the homeless guy on the corner. It's the family with at least one person working one or more jobs."

Berg is executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, an organization that helps oversee 1,200 soup kitchens and food pantries that provide meals to 1.2 million hungry people – 417,000 of them children. It does this by helping the centers obtain food, staff, volunteers, training, technology and funding. But it doesn't stop there. The organ-

## The New York Foundling

In the wake of the Civil War, the Sisters of Charity opened a small foster home in the heart of Greenwich Village for children left behind by their parents. Today The New York Foundling, as it's called, continues its mission as the city's largest foster home, providing both preventive and foster care services.

Serving more than 13,000 children each year, The Foundling offers a diagnostic center for teens (the only one in the city) and a group crisis nursery where parents in crisis can leave their children while getting much needed help – among other very important services. "We believe children should be

raised in families, and if not in their own family, then in a family setting," says Bill Baccaglini, The Foundling's executive director.

In the future The Foundling plans to open a charter school to combat the academic gap between the children in foster care and everyone else.

What makes The Foundling truly stand out is how dedicated its staff and volunteers are to their work. "We need to convince every adult in this city that there are children who aren't safe," he says, "and we are all responsible for those who are most vulnerable."

To find out more about The New York Foundling, call 212-633-9300 or visit [www.nyfoundling.org](http://www.nyfoundling.org).

—By Vidya Singh

**LISA HOLTON**, president of *Scholastic Book Fairs and Trade Publishing: The New York Women's Foundation* is a cross cultural alliance of women helping women achieve economic self-sufficiency. We raise money and put it in the hands of amazing grass roots organizations at the forefront of the fight against injustice against women and girls. (*New York Women's Foundation*, 212-414-4342, [www.nywf.org](http://www.nywf.org))

**NANCY KALISH**, co-author of *"The Case Against Homework: How Homework Is Hurting Our Children and What We Can Do About It."* My favorite charity is *New York Cares* because it gets me involved in projects that directly benefit my fellow New Yorkers. I love the fact that I can sign up online for any of the hundreds of projects NYCares sponsors each month, and fit in volunteer work whenever I'm free. (*New York Cares*, 212-228-3232, [www.nycares.org](http://www.nycares.org))

**LIZ KRUEGER**, State Senator: The Adaptive Design Association, who works to ensure that children with disabilities get the customized equipment they need to participate fully in home, school, and community life. (*The Adaptive Design Association*, 212-904-1200, [www.adaptivedesign.org](http://www.adaptivedesign.org))

**NIKKI KULE**, children's clothing designer, *Kule by Nikki Kule*: I love *Baby Buggy* for two reasons. They make giving very easy by coming to your house to get any baby clothes or toys or equipment you want to donate. And for new moms who have nothing, they put together a whole kit of everything you need for your child. They want the mothers to feel great and loved. (*Baby Buggy*, 212-736-1777, [www.babybuggy.org](http://www.babybuggy.org))

ization also assists families striving toward economic independence by helping them develop the tools they need to bring food to the table – through work, earned income credit, and food stamp benefits.

One of the organization's biggest challenges, according to Berg, is getting New Yorkers to think beyond the holiday season. Besides Thanksgiving and Christmas when volunteers are in abundance, Berg says, "there are 363 other days of the year when we desperately need help and people actually have less food to eat."

To find out more about the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, call 212-825-0028 or visit [www.nyccah.org](http://www.nyccah.org).

—By Caroline Rodgers

family  
pick



**THOMAS LUNDE**, founder of Little Kids Big Art: One of our charities is Kids in Crisis. It supports children that have to be moved out of their home environment and live in this home until the crisis they are in has passed. (Kids in Crisis, 203-327-KIDS, [www.kidsincrisis.org](http://www.kidsincrisis.org))

**SARAH MERIANS**, owner of Sarah Merians Photography & Company: The Pediatric Cancer Foundation. If only we could find a cure for this terrible disease that is affecting young people now more than ever. (Pediatric Cancer Foundation, 914-777-3127, [www.pcfweb.org](http://www.pcfweb.org))

**NATALIE MEYER**, clothing store owner, *Natalie and Friends*: ACC, which stands for Animal Care and Control. They put 50,000 dogs to sleep a year. We want to help them so they don't have to do that. We're also involved every year at Sloan Kettering, sending clothing for 400 children at the hospital. (ACC, 212-788-4000, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, 212-639-2000, [www.mskcc.org](http://www.mskcc.org))

**DR RUTH NASS**, Professor of Clinical Neurology, NYU Medical Center: Common Cents has taken the simple idea of children collecting pennies and turned it

## PENCIL

When her children entered New York City's school system, Lisa Belzberg became fascinated with the relationship between community and public education. She even began brainstorming ways to make an impact. "I would walk by the same public school every day, and I would say to myself, 'I wonder what's going on in there?' But it's not like you can knock on the door, so how would I find out?"

Her answer was Principal for a Day (founded in 1995), which has brought 750 New York business leaders—everyone from "movers and shakers to furniture movers" — to schools throughout the city. From that stemmed PENCIL (Public Education Needs Civic Involvement in Learning), which works

on a broader scale, pairing up schools with specific businesses which can provide students with career awareness, assist with fundraising, or donate needed technology — among other things.

"I met with a guy recently who is a very big deal in the construction industry," says Belzberg, "and he told me that the second his principal needs anything, whether it's a new gym or an air conditioner or new uniforms for the basketball team, he just takes care of it."

Though Belzberg admits that New York City public education still needs a lot of work, her organization has made quite an impact so far.

For more information about PENCIL, call 646-638-0565 or visit [www.pencil.org](http://www.pencil.org).

—By Megan Doughty

into a great citizenship program in schools. They've figured out how to feed the flame of empathy in every child, before it flickers out. (Common Cents, 212-736-6437, [www.commoncents.org](http://www.commoncents.org))

**GABRIELLA ROWE**, director of the Mandell School: I've been focusing on literacy and early-childhood education because that's where the growing separation

between the haves and the have-nots really starts. One wonderful group I support is First Book. They get children's books, new ones, into schools, homes, libraries, day care centers, anywhere there are young, needy kids. (First Book, 202-393-1222, [www.firstbook.org](http://www.firstbook.org))

**LISA SPIEGEL**, co-director, *SoHo Parenting*, and co-author of "A Mother's Circle: An Intimate Dialogue on Becoming a Mother": My favorite charity is Habitat for Humanity. Their goal is to eliminate the below standard housing for poor people all over the world. This summer my 19-year-old daughter and I went to New Orleans to build houses for victims of Hurricane Katrina. It was a profound experience — an amazing way to teach important values like helping the less fortunate and the incredible pride one gets in rolling up your sleeves! (Habitat For Humanity New York City, 718-246-5656, [www.habitatnyc.org](http://www.habitatnyc.org))

**PAM WOLF**, owner of New York Kids Club: It's Music for the People. The organization is based on the premise that classical music plays a powerful role in all of our lives and is the universal language worldwide. To this end, the group of musicians hosts benefit concerts in impoverished areas in return for whatever is needed (books, food, school supplies). (Music For the People, [www.musicforthepople.org](http://www.musicforthepople.org)) •

family  
pick

## Women In Need

In 1983, Women In Need (WIN) opened a shelter to house ten women and children in a Manhattan church. Today, the organization houses 2500 homeless and disadvantaged New Yorkers each night.

Beyond offering shelter WIN is committed to providing tools for a fresh start to anyone who walks in the door — that includes women, men and children. "We have a tremendously disciplined atmosphere here, a structure and expectations for those who come here, and we raise those expectations by the time they leave," says WIN's executive director Bonnie Stone.

Since the families who arrive at Women In Need are often in crisis, WIN makes a six-month promise to house

them and get them on the right track. According to Stone, 90 percent of the homeless families who seek help are headed by women, many of whom have issues that need to be treated upon arrival; 10 percent are substance abusers; and many suffer from depression.

Almost 400 people work for Women In Need, from social workers, day care providers and teachers to security guards and volunteers.

WIN functions through a partnership with the government and the public. "We couldn't do it without them and the donations of people," says Stone. "It's amazing."

For more information about WIN call 212-695-4758 or visit [www.women-in-need.org](http://www.women-in-need.org).

—By Meredith Napolitano

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