

Danielle STEEL

A moving and
inspirational
true story

A Gift
of Hope



About the Book

In her powerful memoir *His Bright Light*, Danielle Steel opened her heart to share the devastating story of the loss of her beloved son. In *A Gift of Hope*, she shows us how she transformed that pain into a campaign of service that enriched her life beyond what she could imagine.

For eleven years, Danielle Steel took to the streets with a small team to help the homeless of San Francisco. She worked under cover of darkness, distributing food, clothing, bedding, tools, and toiletries to the city's most vulnerable citizens. She sought no publicity for her efforts and remained anonymous throughout. Now she has chosen to tell her story to bring attention to their plight.

In this unflinchingly honest and deeply moving memoir, the famously private author speaks out publicly for the first time about her work among the most desperate members of society. She offers achingly acute portraits of the people she met along the way – and issues a heartfelt call for more effective action to aid this vast, deprived population. Determined to supply the homeless with the basic necessities to keep them alive, she ends up giving them something far more powerful: a voice.

By turns candid and inspirational, Danielle Steel's *A Gift of Hope* is a true act of advocacy and love.

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About the Author

Also by Danielle Steel

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DANIELLE STEEL

A Gift *of* Hope

Helping the Homeless

To Nick, who, yet again, has helped so many, even in his absence, for being the guiding light that got me to the streets, and kept me there, for him.

To my wonderful children, Beatrix, Trevor, Todd, Sam, Victoria, Vanessa, Maxx, and Zara, who cheered me on and let me do it, despite the time, expense, and risks.

To Bob, Cody, Jane, Jill, Joe, John, Paul, Randy, Tony, and Younes, for years of hard work, for risking their lives and giving their love and time so generously, and for being the extraordinary people they are. They are the real angels in the story, to me and to so many.

To the many, many wonderful people I have met on the streets, for their kindness, their humanity, their dignity, for allowing us to work among them, and for the privilege of serving them. With the deepest respect, I salute your courage, love, and grace, and thank you for the many gifts you have given me.

To Tom, for urging me to write this, despite all my protests, and for encouraging the street work from the start.

To all of you, with all my heart and love, deep gratitude, and profound respect.

d.s.

And to the memory of Max Leavitt, who was so dearly loved and is so greatly missed.

“Were it not for Hope, the heart would break.”

—*Scottish proverb*

FOREWORD

FOR ELEVEN YEARS, I worked on the streets with the homeless, and without question it altered my life. It is life-changing to be there, to look into the eyes of people who are lost, suffering, sick in body and mind, most of whom have lost hope. They are the forgotten people, whom no one wants to think about or know. For most people it's terrifying to acknowledge them, or see them—what if that could happen to us? It's a horrifying thought. "There but for the grace of God ..."

I've watched people quietly disintegrate on the streets, and seen some of them go from people without a place to live to people who have no life, no hope, no way out. Some have disappeared, some have died, some of the young ones have gone home, some have gotten help from the available programs and agencies, but most of them are still out there, their situation worsening day by day. And in our fragile economy, the number of people on the streets has increased exponentially.

My goals were never lofty. At first I had no goals at all. In my own grief at having lost a son, I tried to help people who appeared to be in as much pain as I, even if for different reasons. I began to learn what they needed, practically, and to supply those needs. And eventually I realized that my "mission," if you can call it that, was only to keep them alive until real help could address their broader needs. My focus was small and specific: to keep them alive on the streets, to keep them warm and dry and fed, to make them as comfortable as possible in a terrible

situation. It was all I could do. I am not a political person, I have no influence on city government, I didn't have enough money to save them all. I'm not a physician or a psychiatrist to address their medical problems. I was one person who wanted to do what I could, with the help of ten others who helped me form what became a very efficient team. We went out night after night, dealt with whatever we found, and served three hundred people a night, three or four thousand a year. We gave them clean, warm new clothing, tools they needed, hygiene supplies, a few practical things like umbrellas and flashlights, pens and pads, and safe, healthy packaged food. And I hope that along the way, we saved a life or two—or more.

Right from the beginning, it was essential to me to remain anonymous in this work, both to the people I served, and in the larger world. I remained convinced that it was completely unimportant who I was. We created something unique, helping to keep the homeless alive on the streets, giving them what they needed most acutely. I felt that my identity was irrelevant and could only get in the way. It didn't matter who I was. Talking about my work on the streets served no purpose either. I was sure that anyone who knew about it would view it with contempt or suspicion, or use it as a springboard to publicity that I didn't want. I wanted to do the work as quietly and invisibly as possible, and I never deviated from that until finally, with what I had learned, I felt that speaking up for them would help them more than my silence.

I am lending the homeless my voice now, so that others will think about them and see their plight. If I, who have walked among them for eleven years and care about them, don't speak for them, who will? Although I have always said that I would never do this, and have done everything I could to stay below the radar, I have finally realized that I need to speak up and share what I've learned. I can be the voice in the world they do not have. There are more people

than ever on the streets, there is less and less money available to help them, and some of the laws regarding hospitalization of the mentally ill need to change. But before anything can change, people must be willing to see the homeless and not pretend they aren't there. They so desperately need our help, in so many ways. And we cannot help or change what we refuse to see.

There is so much that needs to be done, and the smallest effort matters and makes a difference: clothing, meals, medical treatment, psychiatric help, wound care, a ride to an emergency room, a blanket, a kind hand. There is much for even the uninitiated to do. And it takes many to do it.

So this book is a call for help. There are too few of us reaching out to those on the streets, in a silent, unseen war where too many lives are being lost, when in fact so many more could be saved if only people knew, or cared. There are in fact several groups in every city, working diligently to help the homeless in any way they can, and many of them privately organized and funded when city and state governments don't do enough to help.

The homeless need so many things from us. In addition to housing, medical care, mental health care, and job training, they need a strong hand to help them up. And aside from what we can do practically, we need to share our strength and give them hope: the hope that things can change, and the courage to hang on.

I didn't realize it at the time, but along with the supplies we handed out, we gave them hope. We stopped our vans, we jumped out, we walked up to people who had never seen us before and probably wouldn't again, and we handed them bags filled with what they needed to survive for weeks or even months. And we wanted nothing in return. Nothing. They didn't have to embrace our religion, our beliefs, our politics. They didn't need to know where we came from, or why. They didn't even need to say thank you, although they always did, always. And for one shining

instant, they knew with total certainty that someone cared, and fell out of the sky to help them, like an answer to their prayers. It led them to believe that good things could happen again. It showed that someone cared. It gave them hope, which was our most important gift to them.