

S B L S

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SEASON'S GREETINGS

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KERRI MURRAY,
PRESIDENT OF
SHELTERBOX USA, IS
AN EXTRAORDINARY
COMMUNITY FIGURE
OF COMPASSION,
EMPATHY, AND
PHILANTHROPY

Leading a life



One sunny Sunday in San Francisco (a rarity of sorts), I stroll down Union Street on my way to Rose's Cafe, where I'm set for a coffee date with what feels like an old friend. We met this time last year, almost to the day, at a different coffee shop—dare I say, it's becoming a tradition. The cafe is bustling, an ideal setting to match the warmth and charisma of my brunch partner Kerri Murray, who's going on her eighth year as President of ShelterBox USA. We ease into catch-up mode over cappuccinos, as if no time has passed—starting with stories of her September wedding at San Ysidro Ranch before launching into tales of an entirely different endeavor—Kerri's winter months spent on the ground in Kyiv, distributing emergency aid with ShelterBox in the midst of Ukraine's devastating invasion.

As one of Santa Barbara's 2,000+ nonprofit organizations, one of the highest ratings per capita in the country, ShelterBox's mission is to provide disaster-stricken areas and conflict zones across the globe with the life-saving shelter, equipment, and tools families needed to regain their livelihoods. 2023 has proved a trying year for the global community, with an ever-growing need for ShelterBox's provisions of tents, cooking sets, solar-powered lights, water filters, mosquito nets, blankets, and beyond. Devastating earthquakes in Syria, Turkey, and Morocco, as well as the enduring war in Ukraine and Israel, have resulted in more need for disaster relief than ever before. Global displacement hangs at a startling figure around 110 million people. When I spoke to Kerri last year, the Russian invasion in Ukraine was less than a year old, and ShelterBox forces were just beginning their aid there. Fast forward to winter 2023, and Kerri found *herself* working on the front lines of Kyiv's war zone, putting herself in the shoes of the uncertainty that Ukrainian families are experiencing on a daily basis.

"Being able to work on the front lines, in a war zone, you can really feel it. What these families are facing every day, just how difficult life is and the basic things that they need for survival," she says. "I spent pretty much every day of my deployment there in bomb shelters," she adds, noting that there was never a day where the air raid alerts didn't go off, predicting anywhere from 45 minutes to two hours spent in a bomb shelter. "It's that sense of uncertainty, that fear, but the Ukrainian people have this incredible sense of fortitude and resilience." When I ask how she adjusted to this frightening reality, she brushes it off. "It's part of everyday life in Ukraine."

Repercussions of the world's natural disasters and global conflicts vary depending on the specific situation, time, and place, hence so do ShelterBox's aid packages. "It's not really a 'shelter box,' if you will, anymore," Kerri explains. "It's often a very customized aid package to meet your unique needs, depending on what they are in that situation," she says. For example, scenes from Kyiv's winter, demanding sleeping bags and blankets, are very different from the aid that may be distributed in Malawi. ShelterBox is all about meeting people where they are, essentially providing the building blocks for a community's self-recovery. "It's the analogy of not giving someone a fish, but teaching them how to fish, maybe supporting them with a fishing rod," Kerri says. These flexible aid packages, such as cash stipends in addition to ShelterBox materials, enables a freedom of choice essential for communities facing crises from natural disasters to war.

I pause to sip my cappuccino, mesmerized by Kerri's infectious sense of compassion, and I recall our 2022 meetup, half-remembering a story of Kerri's fateful introduction to the organization. Formerly a pharmaceutical executive at GlaxoSmithKlein, she'd been tasked with a mission in 2009: to create a business plan for Santa Barbara-based medical relief organization Direct Relief. The timeline? Six months. The born-and-bred East Coaster and her daughter Sofia, four years old at the time, moved across the country and almost instantaneously fell in love with the energy of Santa Barbara. Kerri was two months into the job when disaster struck.

Many lives changed forever on January 12, 2010, when a 7.0 magnitude earthquake hit the impoverished nation of Haiti, and so did Kerri's. "My assignment became really real, really quickly." In this unprecedented moment, demanding a massive need for medical attention and a rapidly rising death toll, Kerri realized she could apply her rigorous corporate and business training to some of the most vulnerable people on the planet. She deployed to Haiti with Direct Relief, and there she happened upon another nonprofit by chance. "When I went to Haiti, the first organization I saw on the ground was ShelterBox. It was everywhere."

Kerri's initial impressions of ShelterBox may very well have fatefully foreshadowed her current position as its President. "I really connected with the tangibility



KERRI MURRAY AT SHELTERBOX HEADQUARTERS

of seeing people's immediate needs where they lost everything—Port-au-Prince was rubble—and this organization was coming in and putting up something so basic as a tent, and providing cooking sets, and working alongside other NGOs," she recalls. "I was moved by their mission, because you could see the impact they were having in a place that was absolutely crushed by this earthquake."

To put it lightly, Kerri has first-handedly borne witness to some of the world's most devastating natural disasters, having deployed to Japan after the 2011 tsunami, and to the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan, which struck land in 2013 as one of the worst tropical cyclones ever recorded. These experiences, while devastating, provided the context for Kerri to make a life-changing career pivot. "I was so moved by humanitarian work, that I just finally found this massive connection I think I'd always been searching for, in the pursuit of meaning." That's why, when she got the call from ShelterBox USA in 2015 recruiting her to be its President, it was an easy decision.

"In all of these instances, there was one organization that was always in my purview that was there doing really good work, and it was ShelterBox," she says.

"So when they called something innately in me said, this is where I'm meant to be." Fast forward eight years, and the nonprofit has grown exponentially under her leadership. In its first 15 years of existence, ShelterBox reached one million people with its aid—it took only five years to reach the next million. "And we're just speeding up that trajectory," Kerri adds, the number of beneficiaries now nearing three million.

Uplifting women and girls is a huge part of that mission, as this demographic suffers disproportionately in situations of disaster. Gender based violence, economic loss, high death rates, lack of education for girls, and lack of access to emergency healthcare make women and girls a particularly vulnerable subset. "We work to prioritize the most vulnerable, and they're often women," Kerri says. Her favorite day of the year? International Women's Day.

Synonymous with this goal is her involvement in other female-empowering nonprofits in Santa Barbara, most notably Amplify (formerly Girls Rock), an organization designed to empower girls through music and arts while giving them a home base within the community. Her daughter went through

the program, and Kerri herself served on the board for six years. “It is one of the most transformational programs in the world for girls,” she says, tackling the issue of self-esteem through music, performance, and team collaboration. She’s also a huge advocate for Unity Shoppe, a nonprofit providing qualifying community members with free essentials like groceries, clothing, and job training.

Kerri recognizes that many Santa Barbara residents can relate to ShelterBox’s humanitarian mission, especially considering the tragic Montecito mudslides of 2018. “I think the community started to connect with our work on a totally different level,” she says, after realizing what it can feel like to lose everything in an instant. She continues to express her gratitude towards the town’s constant selflessness and spirit of philanthropy. “[We’re based] in a community of people who give up themselves, their time, their talent, their treasures, people who are active participants. It’s such a dynamic group of people who get involved and take action,” she reflects.

In the spirit of giving back, Kerri hopes the Santa Barbara community will keep ShelterBox in its purview as a recipient of support this holiday season. Since ShelterBox isn’t government-funded, its operations are almost completely contingent on private



charitable support. “Unfortunately, most people just learn about us on the worst day ever. We make the news headlines for responding in a place like Turkey, but the work that we do on an everyday basis in places like Cameroon, places like Yemen, places like Syria, is really a life saver.”

Kerri is so riveting that I barely notice an hour has passed. I look down at my cappuccino, now long since polished off, as Kerri leaves me with a powerful parting anecdote. “One woman is very indicative of why I do what I do, and her name is Esther,” she says. Esther is 21 years old, and resides in the Minawao Refugee Camp in Cameroon, where she’s lived ever since Boko Haram overtook her village in Nigeria and killed her entire family. Part of a group called the “long-term displaced,” the highly overcrowded camp has become her home. Esther has since married and had two children, while excelling in her work as a seamstress, becoming one of the most

successful dressmakers throughout the whole camp. “She now is the primary breadwinner of her family,” Kerri says. “That’s kind of the quiet work we do, but those are the people that drive me every day.”

Kerri’s striking blend of compassion, perspective, and introspection is what makes her a truly exemplary leader and community figure, while her unwavering sense of humility allows her to connect to people in vastly different life scenarios. “Having a life that is in the pursuit of meaning, and being able to do something every day that helps transform people’s lives, means everything to me,” she says. Kerri hasn’t yet visited Cameroon, but she hopes to make it one of her next ShelterBox trips, and to finally be acquainted with the lovely and brave Esther. I’m eagerly anticipating our next yearly coffee shop date, where I’m confident that Kerri will bring another vast arsenal of life-changing anecdotes to the breakfast table.*

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