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Random acts of kindness

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A simple act of kindness and an unexpected detour changed Zane Buzby's life forever. As well as the lives of some 850 very senior seniors living in Eastern Europe and Russia.

The story begins in 2001, when Buzby decided to take a hiatus from her career as a producer and director at just about every major television network in Hollywood and make a sentimental journey to the small village in Belarus from which her grandparents had emigrated. On the way, she stopped in Vilna to attend the first Litvak Congress. There she met Professor Dovid Katz, an American dialectician who had started the first Yiddish Program at Oxford and then become Academic Director of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute at Vilnius University, a position he still holds.

Dr. Katz, upon learning that Buzby would be traveling through Lithuania and Belarus, asked her to make a "small detour" to visit some elderly Jews and bring them gifts of Yiddish newspapers, food, and small packets of U.S. dollars. This "small detour" set Buzby on the path to a gigantic new lifetime commitment.

The people that she met were Jews who had survived all the horrors of the 20th century. Now in their 80's and 90's, these remaining Jews had outlived their families, their children and their friends. With no support, emotional or financial,

they were eking out their lives in rundown shacks with no plumbing, no electricity, no running water, and no food except what they could grow themselves (mostly just potatoes). "For them, the war never ended," Buzby says.

Haunted by what she had seen, and by the kindness and hospitality she had received during these visits, Buzby returned to Los Angeles and, with philanthropist S. Chic Wolk, set up the Survivor Mitzvah Project to funnel money to these new friends. "It's incredible how much just a little money can buy," she says. It can change their lives!"

In addition to her work on the project, Cyber Oasys, based in Santa Monica, has commissioned her and partner to provide the first totally interactive, viewer initiated programming for online and mobile platforms. Conan Berkeley, will produce the segments while Buzby will direct. Their first project, "Stop the Run" (a jargon-ish way to say "Seize the Day").

While all these projects are enough to keep any 10 people busy, Buzby manages them all with aplomb. But her most urgent concern remains the Survivor Mitzvah Project. She is conscious of time passing, and the eventual passing of this sadly neglected generation. Her goal, she says, is "to bring help quickly and directly to these survivors so that they may live out their last years with some measure of comfort, support, and dignity."

To participate in the Survivor Mitzvah Project contact Buzby at zbuzby@survivalmitzvah.org or log onto her Web site at www.survivormitzvah.org