

THE MEADOWDALE COMMUNITY PROJECT

BY: MATT SHEA

This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO RENÉE LYNN KLAUSE



Renée Klause having a great Christmas with her kids, Dolly, Mork and Chelsey.

Renée Klause is a special friend from Heaven who greatly inspires me.

This novel that you are about to read personifies her life. It's all about the stigma society often renders to its disadvantaged. An injustice that leaves a trail of underfunded programs and segregation.

Renée Klause has lived on both the receiving end as well as the giving. When she receives assistance in any way; she immediately *gives back* in greater numbers. This ranges from assisting at the local clothing drive for the needy and their lunch program; to

being heavily involved with her church and the many charitable aspects it's involved with.

Renée has helped with this book project by expressing ideas and taking pictures. She even included her wonderful golden retriever, *Dolly*. A family member who recently had to be laid down.

When I initially met her, I wondered if she ever stopped smiling. Renée is a happy soul and for good reason. Her faith in God carries her through life rain or shine.

If anyone wants to contact this angel; I will forward all messages meant for her via my website.

www.mattsheabooks.com

Renée; it's people like you who make this world a better place. I hope you enjoy this book: *It's you!*

Your special friend,

–Matt



Renée Klause with her famous golden retriever, Dolly and special friend, author Matt Shea

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INTRODUCTION

A delivery of recyclable material sat on a desolate loading dock. Metal banding secured a conglomeration of worn-outdated parts that once outfitted the latest county building being demolished.

It was a sign of the times. Temporary jobs were created, but only to confirm the loss of others. Crews were employed to erase the condemned structures that once housed social workers, youth counselors and senior services. These were buildings that could no longer be funded for new codes with invaluable programs falling to the wayside.

The demolition crews worked with the understanding that they could in turn create more jobs. They accepted the arduous task of separating anything recyclable and reducing it to bite-size pieces. Once this was accomplished it would be strapped on pallets and relayed to its next station: The Meadowdale Community Center, often referred to as the “MCC.”

The Meadowdale Community Center was one of controversy and errant decisions. In its glory days, it was a lavish retirement home on beautifully landscaped acreage. Trails that led to picnic tables, ponds and open pastures promised a calming effect for those who lived there. The day came when the one-story wooden building with white paint and forest green trim was outdated.

From there it became the *Alcatraz Island* of Meadowdale. The desolate campus seemed to offer everything; but for what purpose? It started its second life as a youth center with a

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gymnasium under construction. Abruptly, the project ran out of funding and was stopped with only the steel frame standing. The abandoned structure lay idle for two years until it became an overflow lot for the city's Water Department and heavy equipment. In time, it was boarded up again and subject to demolition.

A small group of local activists successfully lobbied to save the aging building and have it resurrected one last time. The landmark with the sagging back would finish out its career to serve the local handicapped and mentally challenged. An ingenious pairing that would house the city's abandoned complex with their shuffled disadvantaged.

This was where Chase Mansfield and his friends would rummage through the rusted nails, twisted metal and bent pipes; allocating them into their prospective recycle barrels. With supervision, they had free range to use anything they saw fit for artwork. This project gave the illusion that these spirited souls were playing an *important* role for the township. To many, this suggested that Chase and his friends were at best a *third wheel* for the taxpayers.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

These humble beings were blessed by their simplicity and never lost sight about caring for others. Their so-called 'limitations' never served as a barrier when they united for a cause. The unwanted material placed before them seemed to represent their lives. They *knew* there was an important use for it and with their love, courage and creative minds would find it. Their efforts would make it just as good as before, if not better.

The result?

A product that would start a trend in the town of Meadowdale. One that created pride and *did* things for others...

CHAPTER I

Chase Mansfield's breath vaporized in the morning chill. The fall weather forced the fifteen-year-old with curly blonde hair to once again bundle-up. Wearing a zipped-up blue nylon ski jacket with a matching green/blue knitted beanie he gazed at the path before him. Intense crystal blue eyes peered down the trail, spotting a familiar wooden structure. A smile of anticipation arose from the mentally disadvantaged teen as he continued his trek. Chase walked to the clearing that exposed the backside of 'portable # 3' on the campus of the MCC.

Eagerly, the lean boy who stood six-foot even approached the abandoned classroom, just shy of its outdoor electric meter.

The glass bubble that was almost six inches in diameter was conveniently eye-level for Chase to marvel at. The transparent shield enclosed a series of five penny-size one-handed 'clocks' that rotated opposite of the one next to it. There were lengthy numbers that included letters from the alphabet that were perfectly centered throughout the metal face that held the meters. Directly in the middle of this electronic gismo was a disk that lay flat with a small portion of it exposed. It slowly spun like a CD disc, showing that someone or something was still being accommodated. The conscientious boy gleamed with excitement realizing that everything checked out.

Chase Mansfield was following his daily routine whenever he attended the community center. It was now time to address his first chore of the day. Reaching into his right coat pocket, he grabbed a peanut that was still in its shell. Looking at the metal

pole that ran through the utility box, he followed it to the ground. Leaning next to it was a plastic light blue bowl filled with water. Inches away was a small hole burrowed in the dirt that channeled under the obsolete building.

This hole was where a special friend lived. One that he thought about every day and fed whenever possible. It was the home of a maimed squirrel he named, *Humphrey*.

Chase pinched the peanut with his thumb and index finger while cautiously leaning over the hole. Meticulously, he positioned the nut and dropped it into the sloped opening and watched it roll downward out of sight.

Next he quietly stood up and took several steps backwards. The caretaker grabbed another nut and with a gentle underhand toss, had it land two feet away from the water bowl. Chase continued to walk backwards and grabbed a few more nuts out of his pocket, placing them into his left hand. Finally he stopped an acceptable thirty feet away from the power meter and waited.

Within a minute, a lovable squirrel with distinction made its presence known. It had an unmistakable chopped tail that resembled a wire brush that one would use to clean a pipe. It also had a clearly visible tattered left ear, confirming identification. It was definitely *Humphrey* as *it/he* stood up with *its/his* small arms dangling.

Chase smiled in relief. He loved *Humphrey* and personally appointed himself to take care of *him*. The youth maintained the distance needed for his pet to comfortably gather the food.

The rodent's nose started to twitch, utilizing senses to survey the environment. The parameter would soon be inspected at a more in-depth level. With eyes wide-open, its head began to swivel in an on/off manner like a robot. Specific angles were addressed that encompassed the native. With caution, the deformed animal lowered itself and scurried towards the awaiting treat that lay before it. There was no time to waste as the wild pet crouched in front of the peanut and using both paws, placed it into its mouth. Instantaneously it turned around and scampered back into its hole.

One-by-one, Chase began throwing peanuts towards the water bowl until his supply was empty. Soon the squirrel was back gathering the nuts and returning home with the bounty. Chase savored the moment envisioning his friend partaking on an Easter egg hunt. The imagery generated a warm feeling inside knowing that he once again took care of him. There was also a special connection he felt with Humphrey: It was as if each could relate to the other, knowing they had much in common.

The doors for the MCC were open with a full day of activities waiting for Chase and his many friends. Chase wanted to be sure not to miss out on any of the fun and waved “Bye-bye” to his furry friend. The enthused boy was having his day off to a good start and walked back to the trail that led him there. His mind was racing as he focused on the next chain of events to come. Weather usually decided on what projects the community center would do on a given day. The youth looked up to see what tell-tale signs the sky would give. Clear skies indicated better odds that they would be outside. This often meant combing the community and picking up garbage for recycle. Such ventures always promised interaction with grateful neighbors and a picnic where they saw fit.

Cold temperatures suggested that art class would fill their time and be guaranteed if it rained or snowed. Either way, Chase enjoyed every minute he spent at the community center. The boy noticed gray clouds above him. His face contorted in wonderment as he thought about the many possibilities that could make up his day. He exited the short path that linked to the parking lot. There before him stood a faded white building with forest green trim. It was accompanied by a matching knee-high sign that read: Meadowdale Community Center.

This was Chase Mansfield’s *home away from home*. A dilapidated structure that lost its battle against the elements years ago. A place that was once frequented by the upper crust and the ‘talk of the town.’

If one took a deep breath and stood back, the aura of desperate souls would make their presence known. Decaying walls and fences were mended by emotional strokes of donated paint. They were adorned by multicolored names, personalized art and hand prints that resurrected the building's pride for a final time. A deteriorating ceremonial process that kept pace with its dysfunctional tenants.

To most it was a burial ground for lost causes. A forgotten place hidden by overgrown trees and bushes.

A familiar voice called out from the distance getting Chase's attention. "Well, aren't you even going to say, "Hi" to us?" Chase immediately looked at the front doors of the complex and saw the spirited team of Renée Klause and her Golden Retriever, Dolly. They paused to acknowledge him before entering the building.

Renée Klause was a middle-aged volunteer that always had a smile on her face. She was short in stature and had lively red flowing hair with dynamic green eyes. The woman and her faithful companion, Dolly were classic examples when it came to 'making a difference.' She was handicapped and on social security, but lived to *give back*.

Her outlets ranged from her church, woman's ministry, woman's choir; to helping at the local soup kitchen, clothing drive and whatever she could be at the community center. Dolly always accompanied her and even assisted when possible. It was common to see the dog wearing a saddle bag full of treats and other supplies to help Renée with her many causes. Chase loved being close to Renée because she always gave encouragement and made him feel *good* about himself.

The teen raised his right arm and waved at the duo. He laughed for joy knowing that it was now guaranteed to be a great day at the community center! Renée waved back as Dolly barked, wagging her tail frantically. "We'll see you inside, Chase," said Renée

"Okay," responded Chase.

Renée and Dolly entered the center with Chase moments behind.

CHAPTER II

Chase Mansfield opened the main door to the Meadowdale Community Center. Upon entering, he was surrounded by multicolored walls and artwork he and his classmates created. The surroundings expressed how *his* culture felt by communicating through their choice of colors and illustrations. Chase and his friends were always proud whenever anyone came to visit.

Suspense was starting to mount as he walked down the hallway of the non-stop kaleidoscope. The boy was seconds away from entering the homeroom for the Special Needs Division. Here, Chase would see who he would be spending his day with and what events lay ahead.

There was a bit of swagger to Chase Mansfield's walk as he neared the homeroom. He was that 'popular guy' on campus.

His initial step into the room caused an avalanche of greetings. The role model was taken by the reception and gazed side-to-side taking inventory of his friends. As always, everyone sat in a large circle with wheelchairs, walkers, an occasional dog and smiles gracing the room.

Lois Sexton was there; a *cool* friend that was approaching her eighties and 'fit as a fiddle.' Chase knew that Lois never attended the community center without bringing a batch of her famous chocolate chip cookies. He looked to the far corner of the room where a card table traditionally stood with tantalizing refreshments. The cookies were there along with other treats.

The unmistakable cupcakes from Ella Ray's kitchen covered an entire plate. They ranged from chocolate frosting to vanilla and had a tiny American flag on top of each. Chase didn't have to look far to see Ella nodding back at him. With gusto, she extended her hand and gave her patented 'peace sign.' The late-model *hippy chick* from another generation always made things fun.

There was more on the table. Renée's home-made carrot cake, pictures of orange juice, grape juice, paper plates, cups, plastic utensils and napkins awaited.

Chase continued to survey his surroundings. His friend Justin Rodriguez sat in his motorized wheelchair next to his mother, Maria. The thirteen-year-old boy from South America was stricken with MS. His condition, however, never prevented him from being active and happy. Justin always had a smile for Chase and often did things with him off campus. His mother, Maria was a very charitable person who constantly gave her free time to the community.

Nineteen-year-old Allen Smith was making his usual faces as a way to make Chase laugh. When their eyes met, Chase busted out laughing. Allen was an easy-going guy that knew how to create fun wherever he went. He was a graduate from Meadowdale High School the year before and liked to help others. His dad, Steve sat next to him with competing facial expressions. Steve happened across The Meadowdale Community Center a few years earlier and grew attached to it. Together, the father and son team made frequent visits, helped where needed and made friends for life.

There were more present consisting of seniors, counselors, neighbors and others considered disadvantaged. Each made a friendly jest as he waved back.

At that moment, his eyes met with the person who drove him to the MCC that morning; his mother, Julia. Years ago they were abandoned by his father. This devastating blow would prove to have a silver lining. It made them stronger and fueled their propensity to stand up for justice. Julia was the most important person in Chase's life. For Julia, it was the other way around.

The thirty-eight-year-old woman with shoulder-length brown hair stared at her son. Brown eyes glowed through wire-rimmed glasses, personifying her intellect. She was obviously mild-mannered with a medium build and stature to match. Her spirit, however, could move a mountain! She was raising a boy with high standards, having accomplished the most important task:

He was proud of who he was.

Chase Mansfield was feeling at home, spotting a reserved seat next to his mom. The son hung his cap and jacket on a nearby coat rack and sat next to her.

“Well,” addressed Renée Klause in a humorous tone. “We’re happy to see that you could make it today, Chase.” The room erupted with laughter joined by the barking of a happy Golden Retriever.

Chase laughingly rolled with the punch. “I’m glad to be here,” he replied.

“Okay, Chase,” she responded. Renée was this day’s volunteer chairman (chairwoman) and would say the words everyone wanted to hear.

Continuing, she stood up with everyone knowing what she was about to say. “Do you know what?” she asked the room as suspense mounted. Her hands were now behind her back as she hobbled around the floor like an old man. With a gleam in her eye, she carefully looked suspiciously at everyone. All at once she jumped up with enthusiasm announcing, “It’s social time!”

“Yea!” screamed out the entire room.

‘Social time’ was an early morning gathering designed to help everyone get better acquainted. It was the community’s way to let newcomers feel welcomed. Pastries, beverages and smiles enticed introductions that blossomed into friendships. This was *their* idea of a cocktail party.

Julia grabbed Chase’s hand and made a subtle motion. She communicated a message that only *he* would understand. The *old* Chase used to rush to the dessert table to be first in line. This

assured him that he got what he wanted. A selfish act. His mother recently sat down with him and thoroughly explained to the boy about respecting others. Tears came from his eyes upon realizing that he was actually hurting his friends. The boy apologized to his mother and vowed never to place himself before others again.

Social time was just underway. As usual, Chase Mansfield was the first to get up, but only to walk away and allow everyone else to come first. Julia smiled at her hero as she clapped her hands in silence. The son felt good inside having his mother's approval and nodded his head with the understanding. Everyone else noticed the extra consideration Chase was giving and volleyed back.

Lois Sexton just happened to be sitting closest to the refreshment table and found herself first in line. She and the others couldn't help notice how considerate Chase was being and decided to reward him for it. Looking at the boy Lois said, "Chase, you are such a gentleman to all of us." The room all heard what she said and clapped their hands out of respect. Chase blushed as his mother raised both fists in victory. "In fact," said Lois. "I think that I will get your treats first and leave them right here on the table for you." The senior picked up a paper plate and carefully selected samples of each treat and placed the plate on the far corner of the table. Next she asked him what he'd like to drink.

"Grape juice," he replied. Lois poured grape juice into a paper cup and along with a napkin and plastic utensils, placed them by Chase's awaiting plate.

"There," said Lois. "See what you get for being so kind?"

"That's because he deserves it," commented Ella.

"He certainly does," agreed his mother. One-by-one the entire room expressed how Chase always cared about others. They were right.

Within fifteen minutes, everyone had their treats. From there, they sat in different seats joining conversations with those they wanted to get closer to. When it was all over Chase continued with his class. He began to pick up all of the garbage with Allen

jumping in. Last, he wiped down the food table and returned to his chair.

All were now seated with eyes on Renée “Thank you so-much, Allen and Chase,” she said. “We appreciate the extras you do for all of us.” The two nodded in acknowledgment. Changing her tone, the chairperson was about to address an issue that was of importance.

“I have something *very* important to discuss with you today,” said Renée as she addressed the ‘Special Ed’ students. Giving consistent eye-contact to Chase and his disadvantaged classmates, she got more in-depth. “As you already know, the town of Meadowdale needs our help.”

That was music to their ears as they sat up like military pilots at a briefing. Renée continued her professional presentation. She made them fully aware of the *important* role they played for the community.

Renée Klause explained to them that another shipment of valuable recyclable goods was delivered to the complex. It was now time to do their part of the relay with everyone rising to their feet. Renée and Dolly guided the crew out of the room, down the hallway and to the loading dock.

Once inside, Renée opened up a locker that held safety gear provided by the state. Bright orange vests with matching hard hats were handed out to all present. Next, safety glasses and earmuffs were issued. Even Dolly wore the standard hat, vest, glasses and earmuffs. The obedient canine was then tethered to a leash so that she could watch at a safe distance.

Everyone was now in compliance with the state’s safety regulations. Allen knew what had to be done next. He began to pull on the galvanized chain that would raise a rolling metal door, exposing the loading dock. Allen started to pull on the chain as the barrier inched skyward. The others watched in anticipation as the mechanical wall rolled into a cylinder above the doorway. Once finished, he secured the chain on a sturdy hitch that held the

door in place. The loading dock was now exposed with a delivery waiting for the MCC Special Needs Division.

The group stayed back watching Allen follow the procedure. The adult male walked up to a pallet jack and moved the pallet inside, near the recycle bins. He put the jack away and lowered the bay door to safely conceal the dock's four-foot drop. Last, he used a pair of banding cutters to cut the metal straps from the pallets and placed them into a recycle bin labeled 'metal.'

Chase and his friends were now free to roam. With curiosity, they surrounded the unwanted configuration that also needed a home.

What they saw was crude metal pipes intertwined with old sheet metal. It was accented with aluminum conduit protruding frayed wires that reached out like crow's feet. The mound was balanced-out with rusted screws, nails and bolts sprinkled about like nuts on a sundae. To them it was a beautiful work of art that told a story. It was as if it were a lost friend from another defunct social program crying out for new life.

“Well,” said Renée “We might as well get started.”

Chase noticed his mother looking back in admiration. Her *man* was needed, and it was time for him to start work.