

Small donors, big hearts

Brownie Troop 1957 stepped up to help the family of an African immigrant who was badly burned in a house fire.

By [NEAL ST. ANTHONY](#), Star Tribune
Last update: December 25, 2007 - 7:35 AM

My big-hearts-tiny-philanthropists award for this Christmas goes to Brownie Girl Scout Troop 1957 of Coon Rapids.

These girls invested a couple of hundred bucks to make a wonderful holiday for a hard-pressed immigrant family from Brooklyn Center.

And, somehow, despite catastrophe and facing the loss of their house, the family of Roosevelt Gippleh is going to make it.

After all, a still-smiling Gippleh has made his way back from death's door.

"We're just living by the grace of God," Gippleh said the other night at a party thrown for his kids at Hennepin County Medical Center. "My children are so grateful for this. Life is not easy right now, but I have hope."

Gippleh, 39, is a U.S. citizen who immigrated in 1999 from war-torn Liberia with his then-pregnant wife, Joanna.

College-educated and trained as a police officer, Gippleh worked as a \$30,000-a-year warehouseman for a liquor distributor.

One evening in July, Roosevelt said good night to family members and walked to the attached garage to start his old junker and drive to work. The engine caught fire and Gippleh couldn't douse it. He ran inside to awaken the family, call 911 and evacuate the house, before returning to the garage. He walked into a fiery explosion that engulfed him in flames, severely burning 75 percent of his body. Neighbors pulled him from the garage and rolled him on the ground to smother the flames.

When the Rev. Diane Stores, associate pastor at Gippleh's church in Blaine, arrived days later at the burn unit of Hennepin County Medical Center, Gippleh was wrapped like a mummy, with a breathing tube protruding from his mouth.

Doctors doubted that he would live.

After 10 weeks in a coma, Gippleh started to come around. Today, he's walking, the survivor of

numerous skin-grafts, living at home and doing therapy four hours a day to develop strength and dexterity in his hands and arms.

" 'Rosie' is an amazingly positive, hard-working guy," said Sue Hieb-Stewart, a therapist at the medical center. "He comes here every day for prolonged stretching and to try and improve function and to avoid further surgery."

His health insurer, Cigna, has paid the \$842,000 tab so far for doctors and hospitalization, HCMC officials said. However, Gippleh was laid off last summer from his job at the Arden Hills warehouse of J.J. Taylor Distributors.

The family was living on \$220 weekly short-term disability payments that have expired.

"My wife needs to take care of me and the kids," Gippleh said. "I am not yet able to work."

Gippleh hopes to complete therapy within a few months and find work as a security guard.

Moreover, Gippleh hasn't made his \$1,800 mortgage payment for several months on the \$230,000 Brooklyn Center house he bought in 2005. And Saxon Mortgage of Texas has commenced foreclosure proceedings, Gippleh said.

Frankly, Gippleh took on more mortgage than he could afford, despite working a lot of overtime -- an unfortunate circumstance that has ensnared thousands of Americans caught up in the subprime financing boom of recent years.

"The family was in dire financial straits before the accident," Stores said. "His neighbors have rallied, and Liberian friends have helped and prayed. But it's way too much mortgage. Our church has helped as we can, but we are a small community. I am afraid the family will end up in a homeless shelter."

For now, Gippleh and his kids are ever grateful for the Christmas party thrown by Troop 1957, which is headed by Hieb-Stewart. It was a modest affair staged in a therapy clinic. But for the Gipplehs, it was huge.

The girls bought gifts and grocery certificates for Christmas dinner with their savings after Hieb-Stewart told them about Roosevelt's indefatigable spirit and his youngest son, a joyous fellow named Franklin, 4, who accompanies his dad every day.

As the boys beamed, ate Christmas cookies and played with toys, the Brownies gathered around.


"I feel good, like I'm the one who got the presents," said Anna Ramacher, a member of Troop 1957. "The boys said it was their best night ever."

The boys are also grateful that their dad is alive. They help him dress, and they do chores and try hard in school.

"I have open wounds still and the doctors tell me I am not yet ready to work," Gippleh said. "I pray and I have hope."

Gippleh's pastor has started a fund for the family at Bridgewood Community Church, 11670 Lexington Av. NE., Blaine, MN, 55449.

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