

Mary Torrence can still remember that afternoon back in 2003 when her daughter, Melanie, came home with a sad look on her face. The 16-year-old was concerned about a classmate, Turquoise Booker, whose mother had died of breast cancer four years earlier. Turquoise's father had remarried and moved to California, leaving her to live with her grandmother, and the two were barely getting by. The teen got up at 5 A.M. every morning and rode the bus two hours so she could attend the best school in her Atlanta district. But there was little time for studying. In addition to her long commute, Turquoise worked part-time and was cooking meals at home that she sold to fellow students as a way to raise money for college application fees. "I felt so sorry for her," says Mary, 49. "I knew right then I had to help."

AN ECHO FROM THE PAST

The girl's plight struck a deep chord in Mary. She was only 14 when she lost her mother, Corine, to uterine cancer. Her father soon abandoned the family, leaving Mary and her 11 siblings to fend for themselves in the rural town of Lake City, South Carolina. "My sister Irene, who was 21, stepped up and raised the eight of us—the youngest was 5 and the oldest 18—who were still at home," Mary says. "We lived on government assistance and whatever we could earn during summer breaks by gathering tobacco and doing other farm work." Mary had managed to continue going to high school, and she harbored hopes of being the first in her family to attend college, even though the odds were stacked against her. "My brothers and sisters worried about me being disappointed since I dreamed so big," she says.

But fate intervened. During her senior year Mary began working in the guidance counselor's office, where her boss, Leila Austin, saw something special in the determined young woman. Leila contacted a friend who was a member of Club Astoria, a local women's group that created and maintained public green spaces and performed various service projects for the community—including giving \$600 each



A Lesson IN Giving

She never forgot the strangers who helped send her to college after her mother died. Now **MARY TORRENCE** is paying it forward by providing scholarships for teens in need.

by Susan Contreras

year to a deserving student for college. Mary received the check in the mail that May. "It was a total surprise to learn these ladies believed in me," she says. "I wasn't going to disappoint them."

FROM HARDSHIP TO HOPE

Mary was accepted at a nearby community college, Columbia Commercial, paying her way with a work-study program. "I used part of the scholarship to buy a footlocker—I didn't even have a suitcase—and personal items for my room, and saved the rest for emergencies, since I knew my family wouldn't be able to help me," she says.

A quick study, Mary earned an associate degree in secretarial science in just a year and a half. "I wanted to finish early so I could get a job and provide for my family," she says. She moved to Atlanta, where she got an entry-level position at an advertising firm, and her career took off. Eighteen years later she launched her own ad agency, Media Strategies.

The women of Club Astoria who had

"Helping these students get to college involves a lot of hard work, but my passion for them is what carries me through," says Mary. "That's the way it is with everything in life—it's easy to do if it's something that's close to your heart."

made it all possible were never far from Mary's mind, and she wanted to offer the same opportunity for Turquoise and other disadvantaged youth. Tapping her vast network of business colleagues and companies for donations and sponsorships, she founded Students Without Mothers (studentswithoutmothers.org) in 2004, which has since awarded nearly \$100,000 in scholarships to 24 grateful teens. Most have lost their mothers, but in some cases the women are ill or incarcerated. To qualify, an applicant's annual household income must be less than \$50,000, and the student must plan to continue his or her education after high school. Recipi-



"My mom has taught me that nothing is impossible," says Melanie Thomas. Inspired by Mary, Melanie hopes to open a women's health center.

ents are given \$1,000 annually for four years as long as they maintain a college grade point average of 2.0 or higher. Students also receive a laptop and gift cards to help furnish their dorm rooms.

The nonprofit organization, with corporate sponsors that include Verizon, AT&T and Kroger, provides more than money. "We don't just pay for college—we get kids through the door by helping them navigate the admissions and financial aid process, which can be over-

ues to help out during visits home from Georgia's Albany State University, where she's earning a degree in health care management. "I answer phones, stuff envelopes, update computer mailings—anything Mom needs me to do," says Melanie. "I've learned that doing even small things, like telling my mother about Turquoise in the first place, can make a huge difference."

Mary also relies on her husband, David, a marketing and advertising professional who cofounded her company. "When we don't have the funds to cover a student's special needs, he sometimes suggests we pay for them out of our family budget," she says. "That's included getting a computer for an applicant who didn't win a scholarship to buying and delivering groceries when one freshman was recovering from surgery."

Hoping to expand the organization's reach, Mary is hiring a grant writer to raise funds and is also starting a formal mentoring program. "When I see the gratitude from people we've given money to, it reminds me of how I felt about Club Astoria," she says. "You think you're alone in your struggle, that no one cares or notices. Then, out of the blue, someone extends a hand. It's an incredible experience. Our students all have a story of hardship, heartache and ultimately hope. But once we get them through college, they know that their lives did not end with their mothers' death. And they know their mothers would be so proud of them." ●

whelming," says Mary. Students Without Mothers certainly paved the way for Turquoise Booker. "I was discouraged that I'd never go to college, but knowing that these people believed in me gave me hope," says Turquoise, now 21, who has been pursuing a dual major in journalism and marketing at Georgia State University.

GRATITUDE ATTITUDE

While the group has a board that includes directors from Georgia State University and major companies like Coca-Cola, Students Without Mothers is also very much a family affair. Melanie, 21, contin-