

An interview with Allison Hottinger and Lisa Kalberer Creators of *The Giving Manger*



The true spirit of Christmas often gets lost in busyness of the season. As the events of 2020 have made us slow down and shift some of our priorities, this year is the perfect time to refocus on the joy of giving and honor the real reason for Christmas: Jesus' birth. With *The Giving Manger* (WorthyKids), creators and sisters **Allison Hottinger** and **Lisa Kalberer** offer a faith-based interactive family tradition that encourages acts of kindness.

Each Giving Manger box set contains a hardcover picture book, a wooden manger, a bundle of straw, and a sturdy Baby Jesus figure—everything a family needs to start the tradition in their own home.

Q: Where did the original idea for *The Giving Manger* come from?

As we began to raise our own families, we often felt like the true meaning of Christmas and the spirit of giving was getting lost in the hustle and bustle of the season. We wanted to start making the season more about giving and showing kindness to others.

A trip down memory lane reminded us of our neighbor who had a simple wooden manger in their home. A piece of straw would be placed in the manger each time someone in the family did something kind for someone else. We made the first manger in our garage and started filling the manger one act of kindness at a time. We loved nothing more than seeing our little ones excited to give! That simple manger shifted the focus of our Christmas.

We originally made the tradition just for our own family, but when we told friends about what we were doing, we had so many friends who wanted one too!

That's when we put pen to paper, wood to the saw, and clay in our hands to create a book, manger, and baby Jesus—a complete tradition to help families focus on giving and the real meaning of Christmas.

In order to be able to share this tradition with more families, we launched on Kickstarter and were funded within 72 hours! Three years later, after selling out each season, we are partnering with WorthyKids to make sure *The Giving Manger* can get to homes literally around the world. It has been so fun to see how many people everywhere are looking for the same thing we were—to shift the focus back to giving.

Q: Can you share a little bit about the story from *The Giving Manger*?

The Giving Manger is a story of a family who shifts the focus of their Christmas. It tells the story of Anne and Ben who always look forward to Christmas. Each year their dad makes a special wooden toy for them, but he tells them this year will be different. They are starting a new tradition, and there will be more gifts this year, starting December 1. The kids misunderstand, thinking they will be getting more gifts.

On December 1, they get the gift of a manger from their dad, but when they find out that the other gifts will be gifts of kindness to others, they are initially disappointed. However, once they see joy in giving and doing for others, their attitude starts to change.

The story is a way to introduce the manger to the family and to explain the tradition you'll be starting with your own family. Your kids may have the same reaction as the kids in the story at first, but you'll soon see a change. The back of the book also includes ideas to get the family started on acts of kindness.

This is a special story to us because it represents the same shift we've seen in our own families. The focus used to be lists and what the kids were going to RECEIVE for Christmas, but in adopting *The Giving Manger* the focus shifted to what we can GIVE. Christmas is different in our homes than it used to be, and we couldn't be happier about it!

Q: What is included in *The Giving Manger* box set? How does the manger itself work?

The Giving Manger box set includes: A hardcover book for children, wooden manger, bundle of straw and baby Jesus.

Once the family reads the book together, you'll be ready to set up the manger. Put it in a busy area of the house where you'll see it regularly and it will be the center of family activities.



Get your family excited about placing that first piece of straw in the manger when you do your first act of service. For each act of kindness, a piece of straw is placed in the manger. The family works together all Christmas season to create a soft bed for the Baby Jesus, and on Christmas Day you come together to place the baby in the manger that you filled with service and love that year.

We joke that there is a step in the process where you bawl your eyes out as you watch your kids get excited about serving and the manger fills with straw! We're only half joking about this step. It's so special seeing your kids' hearts grown and fill with love and joy.

On Christmas Day, when the manger is full of straw, place baby Jesus in the manger.

Q: The illustrations in the book are both beautiful and unique. Can you describe a little bit about what makes the illustrations special?

The illustrations are all paper cut rather than drawings. Each detail on every page was hand cut by artist Emily King. We've always been fans of her work and were thrilled when she agreed to illustrate *The Giving Manger*. Her simple, timeless art perfectly represents the design and goal of *The Giving Manger*. It is a simple concept, beautifully designed and something that can be used year after year, even passed down for generations.

Q: When you started this tradition with your own family, were the kids hesitant at first like Anne and Ben in the book? Do you see that kids catch on quickly to this concept?

The story is special to us because we saw a shift in our own families when it came to giving and receiving. Kids catch on quick because it is such a simple concept.

It's amazing to see how quickly kids are excited to give! It's the little things; put your brother's shoes away, draw a picture for grandma, help empty the dishwasher, leave a candy cane and a note for the mail man.

The kids love to place that piece of straw in the manger and see it fill up! And having it displayed in your home is a constant reminder to GIVE all Christmas season! We have families tell us they don't want to put the manger away when Christmas is over because they love seeing their kids so focused on thinking of and helping others!

Q: One reason moms dread a certain holiday tradition involving a certain elf is that it requires doing something daily. Do families have to do this every day or is it meant to be a reminder to try and do something as often as possible?

We always encourage and challenge families to put a piece of straw in every day! What we find most often is they are already doing kind things for one another, but putting a piece of straw in helps us recognize it and celebrate it which leads to wanting to do more!

The goal in the end is to do things for others every day without even having to think about it. Don't overcomplicate kindness. Just start with one simple act of kindness. You'll probably get addicted to it and actually want to do more!

Q: Does every act of service have to be big? Can some of the activities be little things around the house?

Little things count! Service to others does not have to be a big production. We always say that the kids can put a piece of straw in the manger for things like putting their brother's shoes away, cleaning up the living room, helping a sibling make a bed, or holding the door open. Celebrating simple and small acts of kindness is how we end up with adults who give big!

Q: For the sake of inspiration, what are some of your favorite acts of kindness that you've done as a family?

There are so many we love, but one specific one stands out. Last year we heard about a sweet elderly man named Jack who lost his wife of 65 years. We rallied our Instagram followers and were able to fill his mailbox with over 500 letters to show him love during the holiday season. It is such a simple act of kindness, but those written words can lift anyone.

So, our favorite is: draw a picture or write a note to someone. It could be left on a sibling's pillow, dropped in the mail for a grandparent, delivered to a nursing home, or handed to a teacher! As a parent I love leaving notes for my kids on their bathroom mirror or in their lunchboxes or backpacks!

Some other ideas for the Christmas season include:

- Drop off flowers to someone. How fun is it to have a poinsettia dropped off on your doorstep and have no idea who it's from? And the kids love to drop the flowers, ring the doorbell and RUN!
- Set up a free hot cocoa stand! Who doesn't love hot cocoa and a daring little face wishing you a Merry Christmas?
- Drop off a surprise dinner to someone. It could just be a take-out pizza or maybe you grab the kids and cook together— either way there is nothing better than seeing the joy on someone's face when you deliver a meal!
- See how many times you can hold the door open for someone today. Our kids love this challenge and so does everyone who is on the receiving end of this kindness!

On our website, we also have a [list of ideas](#) you can download for free.

Q: The Christmas season, like everything in 2020, is going to be different for a lot of people this year. Can you share a few ideas of ways to serve the elderly especially given restrictions for social distancing?

We have a VERY special service project that has been created specifically to bless the elderly in nursing homes! It's estimated that 60% of nursing home residents never have visitors. That's before they had to lockdown due to COVID and limit visitors. A simple letter or coloring picture can bring so much joy and make them feel "hugged" even if we can't be there to hug them.

On our website, you can simply [download our kit](#), color one of the coloring pages or write a letter, and mail it to Three Wishes for Ruby's Residents (the address is included in the download).

If you would like to do something close to home, call some of the nursing homes in your area and see what needs they have. You can collect small gifts such as socks, hand lotion, or chocolate from neighbors or your church and wrap them up with a letter or coloring sheet attached. Anything you do will make the residents feel special and will be greatly appreciated.

Learn more at www.thegivingmanger.com and on [Facebook \(@thegivingmanger\)](#) and [Instagram \(@thegivingmanger\)](#).