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The gift of caring

Elliot Goldman redefines holiday shopping with The Greatest Gift Catalog Ever

By Judy Wiley Photography by Jeremy Enlow

Elliot Goldman is eating on the fly, downing a burrito from Red Cactus, working lunch into a meeting at his busy, nondescript office on University Drive in Fort Worth.

He's just left a presentation, and he has somewhere to be right after this. Goldman's schedule and his thoughts both run a lot like clockwork. Ask him a question, and the answer is organized: "Well, number 1, ..." and he ticks off the answers. That methodical brain, a formidable natural talent for business and a penchant for going out and doing exactly what he wants to do — whether or not he's done it before — landed him in the White House when he was 20, for his first job out of college. He's applying the same skills to an imaginative Fort Worth philanthropic enterprise that's now in its second year.

The Greatest Gift Catalog Ever is an idea born two Decembers ago when Goldman, 37, and his wife, Heather, were looking at holiday catalogs. Inundated with glossy photos of things to buy, Goldman was wishing for a catalog made for giving, so Heather suggested he create one. And he was off. The catalog's first issue helped people donate to 11 local charities.

This year's has 12, including four that are new to the catalog: The Art Station, Boys & Girls Clubs, Cancer Care Services and SafeHaven. The most striking and original way to donate: gift cards, which can be purchased at www.thegreatestgiftcatalogever.com in denominations from \$25 to \$1,000. The recipient can then redeem the card, donating to one of the charities or having it divided among all of them. The purchaser of the card gets the tax deduction, and the catalog mails them an acknowledgement for IRS purposes.

Like a retail catalog, Goldman's has pages describing each charity, including contact information so that people can make direct donations if they wish.

Goldman expects to distribute about 100,000 catalogs this year in two batches — one the first week of November and another the first week of December. Direct mailings will target the Tarrant County business

community and individuals who traditionally give to nonprofits, as well as people who might need help from the organizations in the catalog. It also will go out to readers of *360 West* magazine and *Fort Worth Business Press*, and will be placed in more than 200 locations including bank branches, restaurants, selected doctors offices, carwashes and car dealerships.

Volunteers from Union Gospel Mission will help with delivery and distribution.

The catalog is unusual in the world of donations because it tells donors about the specific projects they can fund. For example, \$50 pays for an hour of tutoring at Lena Pope Home.

Goldman says 100 percent of every donation goes to charity. The sponsors — Bonnell's Fine Texas Cuisine, OmniAmerican Bank, *Fort Worth Business Press* and *360 West* — pay for printing. If a card isn't redeemed or a surplus exists, the money goes to the Shared Community Benefit Organization, which was created for the catalog.

The charities were chosen by Goldman and his wife last year, and by a group of area business and media leaders this year.

It's a sizable enterprise, one that's become the Goldmans' sole community volunteer effort: They dedicate about 1,200 hours a year to the catalog.

The two have a long history of philanthropy in the community. Goldman jokes, "I'm Jewish, so we

Elliot Goldman at the Union Gospel Mission, one of 12 local charities his gift catalog benefits.





Elliot Goldman puts all his volunteer efforts into the Greatest Gift Catalog with 100 percent of all donations going to the Gospel Mission in Fort Worth. Volunteers from the UGM will help deliver and distribute the catalog.

don't get an automatic pass into heaven. I've always been into doing nonprofit projects."

Goldman makes use of the catalog himself: He and his wife give each other the gift cards, and their children receive them (along with other gifts) as well. They've also found that gift cards from the catalog are perfect holiday presents for the children's teachers.

The concept was a new one, but the unknown has never been a concern for Goldman. After attending the University of Texas, the Fort Worth native decided that Washington, D.C., would be a good place to start a career. "I'd never been to Washington. I thought, 'Why not try to get a job at the White House?'" He landed a job in the office of then-Vice President Dan Quayle. Goldman also worked for Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison before leaving politics, and now runs his own business, developing marketing strategies and incubating companies.

Along the way, he's written books,

including *America's Architects of Victory: A Pictorial Biography of World War II Leaders, Heroes and Legends*. In his spare time, Goldman's hobby is meeting historically significant figures. He's met about 500 of them so far, and he has the photos to prove it.

"Ask me," he says, grinning and wrapping up the unfinished half of his burrito. "Just name someone."

Both George Bushes? Done it. Ronald Reagan? Yep. Sting? Check. He could keep going for an hour or more.

But lunch is over, and the hyper-efficient Goldman has places to go, more people to see.

The catalog doesn't have a particular financial goal, he says. Instead, Goldman wants to tell people about the organizations that need help, and to convert money used for traditional gifts into charitable donations. "Every time I get a little victory, I am thrilled," he says.