

Giving Back **Stephonie Wiley-Holmes**

# She cared for sister, and volunteered to help others

*When people volunteer, they can change lives — including their own. Each week in Reason, we will highlight a volunteer's story of giving back and how that selfless act was a true revelation. The volunteer project is a collaboration among the Times-Union, the University of North Florida, the United Way of Northeast Florida and HandsOn Jacksonville.*

**By Nancy Winckler-Zuniga**  
United Way of Northeast Florida

The fall of 2003 through spring of 2004 was a watershed time for Stephonie Wiley-Holmes. She got married, began volunteering, started a new job and lost one of the closest people in her life.

Tears fell as Holmes remembered growing up with her sister.

"She was an angel."

Initially, they were just two kids growing up together — sisters of the



Stephonie Wiley Holmes, volunteer with the United Way's RealSense initiative.

closest kind. But as they got older, their relationship changed with Holmes taking over more and more of the caretaking that her sister — unable to walk due to cerebral palsy — needed.

"We didn't mind her crawling to get around the house, we loved her," said Holmes. "Helping her became systematic. I would pull over the straps as she pulled herself into the chair."

Once she was old enough, it fell to Holmes to help her sister get up; help to get her dressed; help to make her breakfast;

make sure the straps to the wheelchair were fastened properly; and help to get her off to her school bus.

At the end of the day, she'd help to get her sister off the bus, then take her home, make her a snack and help with getting her out of the wheelchair and later, into bed.

They became inseparable support to each other.

Holmes knows she learned how to value others and listen because of her sister and the other children like her that she came to befriend.

"I just loved it," Holmes said. "They were exceptional individuals."

So years later, when her husband asked her to sign up with him to help volunteer with United Way's RealSense initiative, she agreed. It wasn't the kind of help she initially thought she would offer others, but she was open to learning about how this initiative helps others —

## CHANGE A LIFE — AND YOURS

If you would like to volunteer for United Way's RealSense program like Stephonie Wiley-Holmes, you can register and file an application form at [realsensejax.org](http://realsensejax.org), or call (904) 390-3282.

### Here are some other opportunities:

- Help make Easter special for nearly 2,000 local children. For boys and girls ages 5-17, volunteers provide age appropriate pre-assembled and bagged Easter baskets. For teens and young adults ages 15-21, volunteers provide pre-assembled small laundry baskets with various items. To volunteer, email [volunteer@danielkids.org](mailto:volunteer@danielkids.org), or call (904) 296-1055, ext. 1007.
- Join the driving divas at Lutheran Social Services! Volunteers help drive refugees to complete the resettlement process: Health screenings, school physicals, ESL testing, doctor appointments, apply for Social Security cards, and go to DMV. Call Colette Rominger at (904) 730.8247.

**Check out many more opportunities at [www.handsonjacksonville.org](http://www.handsonjacksonville.org) and [www.uwnefl.org](http://www.uwnefl.org).**

remembering how much joy she had gotten out of helping her sister.

Her husband eventually backed out of the volunteer effort, but Holmes continued with her training and began meeting with clients for that first tax season.

They loved her. Her

ability to listen and understand her clients' needs brought the recognition of others and an invitation to apply for a job at WorkSource (now CareerSource) helping the unemployed find jobs. Within weeks, she had gone from stay-at-home mom with

time on her hands to having a very full schedule.

On April 1, as that first tax season was coming to a head, she got the phone call telling her that her sister was gone.

There had been a fire. Holmes' sister, unable to crawl out of the house fast enough, had instead tried to protect their 3-year-old niece. Both died of smoke inhalation. Police found them huddled together.

Now, nine years later, RealSense clients ask for Holmes by name and wait longer in line to have her listen to their stories and help solve their problems. She finds herself inspired by the cute endearments of a couple who have been together 50 years, or others who are struggling to understand new forms and ready to give up.

"We may not always see what our purpose is," Holmes said. "But we're living our purpose."