

Where in the World is Carmen?

My mother always told me, "Seize the moment of excited curiosity." In other words, go for it.

Michael Thomas

What can you learn from a teddy bear, a little bit of stuffed fluff that can't talk? One summer, my oldest daughter and the rest of our family learned a lot.

We had seen a program on television about a reporter who had hitchhiked across America. My daughter Ashley's first comment was, "I wish I could do that!" Of course, as far as my ten-year-old hitchhiking across America—that wasn't going to happen. But I wanted to encourage that spirit of adventure in her just the same.

Three years earlier, Ashley had been diagnosed with cancer. Ever since her surgery, she was shy and distrustful of new situations and new people. Although she is cancer-free now, the tests and scary procedures had made her reluctant to take risks or to venture outside her known world. I began trying to think of a way for her to "hitchhike" across the country without leaving home. That's how Carmen was born.

Carmen is a teddy bear that Ashley had received as a gift while she was in the hospital. We decided that sending Carmen in Ashley's place was a good compromise. So we purchased a notebook to serve as a travel journal and a bag for Carmen to travel in, and Carmen was ready to begin her trip. Ashley wrote this letter in Carmen's journal:

My name is Ashley and I am ten years old. One time on TV, I saw this story about how these kids sent a bear on a trip on a plane. Then I saw another story about how this reporter guy walked across America. Well, we don't live very close to a big airport, and Dad and Mom won't let me walk across America. Carmen can't walk, so will you please help her?

This is my bear, Carmen. She is a special bear. I got her when I had to go to the hospital. She wants to go to all fifty states if she can. But, she will need your help. (Maybe she can even go to Disneyland.) Mom says we can't go until she won't have to carry my little sister. Please let her ride with you and keep her safe. Tell her about yourself so she won't be lonely. I will miss her. So please take very good care of her. I let her wear my guardian angel pin to help keep her safe.

Write a little about yourself and then introduce her to someone new. She wants to meet as many new people as she can. If you keep her for more than one day, please try to write in the journal every day. Where are you going? Where did you pick Carmen up? Which roads did you take? Where are you from? How old are you? Do you have kids? Do you have sisters? I do and sometimes I don't like them. (Mom says I can't say "hate," but I can say that I don't like them, and some times I don't like them a lot!)

I think by about September she will be ready to come

home. In her coin purse is \$5.00. Please put her in a nice sturdy box with her journal and bag and send her to Sac City State Bank. Attention: Caretaker of Carmen Bear.

Someone there will keep her safe for me until I can pick her up. If you would like to hear from Carmen after she gets home, please leave your address in her notebook and we will send you a note and let you know when she gets home safely.

Thank you for taking care of Carmen, and thank you for taking the time to write in her notebook.

Your new friends,
Carmen and Ashley

Our family friend is a highway patrol officer. We asked him if he would be willing to start Carmen on her trip by taking her on his route for a day. That afternoon, he spotted a driver from out of state that wasn't wearing a safety belt. After pulling her over and letting her off with only a warning, Phil asked the driver to take Carmen on the next part of her journey. Naturally, she agreed. That's how Carmen began her tour of the United States.

Summer passed with a flurry of activities, family vacations, visiting grandparents and summer fun. Each day Ashley would ask if any packages had come for her. Each day the answer was, "Not today, Ash." By the middle of September we thought that the chances of Carmen returning home were slim.

Then on September 24, Carmen came home in a ten-inch-square box that had a postmark from Hawaii! The box was packed with mementos of all of the wonderful places and people that Carmen had met. A straw hat from Wisconsin, to keep the sun out of her eyes. An Indian beaded necklace from Cherokee, Oklahoma. An autograph from Mickey Mouse when she went to Disneyland.

A picture of her celebrating the Fourth of July in St. Louis. Another picture of her floating in a swimming pool "catching some rays" while she was in Arizona. Carmen made it to sixteen states, including Hawaii. Not too bad for five months of travel!

But Carmen came back with much more than just "things." She came back with friends whom a ten-year-old living in rural Iowa wouldn't have had a chance to meet. Ashley wrote letters to all of the people who helped Carmen along in her travels. She thanked every one of them for their help and friendship to Carmen and her.

Pretty soon, word traveled around our small community about the traveling bear, and Ashley was asked to give a program about Carmen to a group of over one hundred people. Ashley ended her talk by saying, "Be kind to traveling bears! And if you need a traveling companion, let me know because Carmen still has thirty-four more states to go!"

Since Ashley's presentation, Carmen has become a world traveler. Once again, we are awaiting her return. She was expected home some time ago, and we very much hope to see her again.

I never would have dreamed that a little bit of stuffed fluff could have taught so many things: patience to see what things can happen if we are just willing to wait, the ability to imagine what wonderful things might happen, courage to take the chance and allow those things to happen, and faith to believe in people and in the goodness in their hearts.

My favorite part of the story? After reading the journal, looking at the pictures and tracing the roads that Carmen had traveled, I opened the zippered coin purse that Ashley had sent with Carmen. Inside, folded in half, was the five-dollar bill that Carmen had left with five months ago.

Marieta Irwin