

As a mom, the star knows how many things every baby needs. And she found a way to help.

Uma's Mother Love

Room To Grow founder Julie Brown with her friend Uma Thurman. "She has certainly raised our profile," says Julie.

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Fifth Avenue and 112th Street is a world apart from famous New York City department stores like Saks and Bergdorf Goodman. This Fifth Avenue is not a world of privilege and high finance, but a place where parents struggle to provide the most basic necessities for their families. Fifth Avenue and 112th Street is not a boutique neighborhood. It is a complex of brick housing projects, each one looking like the next. In the middle of this maze is a tiny storefront called Room To Grow. In many ways it's like a garden that magically blooms in the midst of concrete.

On a snowy winter afternoon, I looked in its window and smiled. In this cozy room were clothes, books, toys and strollers—everything for a child from birth to age three. Two young women were seated on little baby chairs. One had on a red cap, overalls and a mohair sweater, and the other wore black pants and black boots. No one would ever guess that the woman in the overalls played *Batman's* female nemesis, Poison Ivy, or the raven-haired vixen in *Pulp Fiction*. (Her next film is a Merchant Ivory production based on the Henry James tale *The Golden Bowl*.) On this day, actress Uma Thurman, 31, is just a casual New Yorker.

Uma's companion is the founder of Room To Grow, Julie Brown. Julie's original idea, which came to fruition in 1998, had a very specific purpose: to aid parents who needed assistance with all areas of their baby's development, from clothing, toys and strollers, to guidelines on how to care for their child.

Getting Uma to help the organization was a big boost. Suddenly, people were interested in finding out more about what Julie was up to. "She has certainly raised our profile, and we get attention because her celebrity is always going to garner attention," Julie says. "But Uma doesn't just lend her name to us. She's very involved. She is one of our board members and is extremely active in how all our decisions are made. She has become a pivotal part of the organization. One of the most important ▶

By Wendy Wasserstein
Photographed by Daniela Stallinger

aspects for me is that she is a mother. She can connect to what a parent is going through—and that's more important than her name."

To those who know her, it's not particularly surprising that Uma would become passionately involved in an organization that helps children. "My dad devoted his life to Tibet and its culture, so I was raised with a sense of service," she says.

The daughter of an Ivy League professor and a Swedish model turned psychotherapist, Uma grew up in Amherst, Mass., and New York City. The Dalai Lama was considered a family friend. The ethereal, 6-foot, blue-eyed beauty is even named after a Hindu goddess.

Uma, whose first notable movie role came in 1988's *Dangerous Liaisons*, was briefly married to actor Gary Oldman in 1990; it was on the set of 1997's

Gattaca that she met her current husband, writer and actor Ethan Hawke. Together, they are raising their two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Maya Ray, in New York's Greenwich Village.

It was becoming a mother that inspired Uma to make Room To Grow a priority in her busy life. "I feel very moved by children," she says. "They are innocent and helpless. Their unnecessary suffering takes your breath away. You can't be a mother and not think about the world your children's contemporaries are coming into."

She has donated clothes and baby essentials and, more important, has tirelessly raised funds for the organization. Uma has also used her celebrity status to enlist companies and friends to give support and make donations. Playtex donated over 3,000 baby bottles and SipEase cups. Other corporate donors have included Tiny Love toys, Fisher-Price, Crayola, Bloomingdale's, Scholastic Books and the Warm Biscuit Bedding Company.

Success, for Room To Grow and its clients, is measured in small, poignant steps: A child gets a winter coat, a mother learns to look for answers. One client, Atasha Jenkins, gets emotional whenever she talks about how Room To Grow has changed her life and the life of her 22-month-old daughter, Nikia. A single mother who works full-time while studying to become a ▶



Room To Grow may sometimes look like a toy store, but the organization is really teaching better parenting.

Baby love

Room To Grow is a nonprofit organization created to help children in poverty, from newborn infants to three-year-old toddlers.

Approximately 200 families have been referred by social-service agencies. They go to Room To Grow's uptown Manhattan location every three months to pick up child-care essentials and to receive guidance on parenting.

"The one thing I try to make clear is that we are not a store at all," says founder Julie Brown. "Our mission is to provide parent support and information in addition to resources." Already, plans are underway for an expansion that will include educational workshops. Pediatricians and other experts will give lessons in baby-proofing a home and offer tips on effective discipline, nutrition and reducing parental stress. Julie and Uma envision Room To Grow as a national organization, with branches in cities like Chicago and Los Angeles. "Los Angeles is a natural," Uma says. "There's just so much excess and so much need. We could begin to bridge that gap."

If you would like to make a contribution to Room To Grow, you can contact the charity by phone (212-427-2520), through the mail (1330 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10026) or on the Web (www.roomtogrow.org). Please make checks payable to Room To Grow.

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nurse, 32-year-old Atasha understands what it is to struggle. "It's not always easy to provide everything you need for your child's growth and development if you are worried about getting food on the table," she explains. "I was living in a shelter when my counselor referred me to Room To Grow. It has provided me with shoes for my child, and books and toys to help her. But you aren't just handed things; the people there have worked to really know us. I was having a hard time finding day care, and Julie helped me with that. When my daughter was starting to walk, Julie didn't just hand me a walker and send me on my way. We talked about what would be right for Nikia. Her potty training was rough for me, and I was encouraged to read parenting magazines—I would have never thought to do that before. Julie has been great in so many ways. She has even written me recommendation letters to find a job. Now I know I'm not alone. I have someplace to turn to."

Like Uma, 34-year-old Julie is from a privileged background. The New York City native was working at a top job for Christie's auction house when she realized it was time for her to make a more hands-on contribution to society. She went to school to become a social worker, and after being in the field for a while, she came up with the idea for Room To Grow. "I think society assumes that women, in particular, have an innate capacity to take care of children," Julie says. "But the truth is, many aspects of mothering can feel confusing and overwhelming—particularly when you don't have the resources to provide for your child."

Julie and Uma met when they were neighbors in a Greenwich Village brownstone in 1997. At first, they were just casual friends. "One day I saw Julie walking around with all this baby stuff," Uma recalls. "And I said, 'Hey, Julie, congratulations!' and then she explained to me about Room To Grow."

Uma got involved almost instantly, spurred by the thought of how much some mothers have while others must raise kids with almost nothing. "Many of the mothers I know spend their days dragging their children to endless classes," she says. "I take my daughter to a few classes, but you can't get into that competition stuff. That's really too crazy. Actually, that's why it makes so much sense to me to come here. These are real issues."

Julie goes to make some coffee and consult with clients. Uma asks me if being a mother has changed my life. "It's been huge. It's been the biggest change for me. But I love my daughter more every day," I say. Uma is immediately sympathetic: "I know. When you have a child—if that doesn't ground you, nothing will. I feel so protective of my daughter and her generation. The thing is, raising a child is also raising a citizen. I guess that's why I'm so committed to Julie and Room To Grow. I hope my daughter becomes the type of person who doesn't take her life for granted and is generous."

I look around this tidy room with infant clothes folded neatly on one side and strollers lined up on the other. Somehow I can't help but think about all the baby showers I've been to in the last few years where the expectant mother gets two Baby Björn infant carriers, four diaper bags and lots and lots of tiny Onesies that won't fit a few weeks after the baby is born. Suddenly it seems clear to me that if all the extras from all those baby showers found their way to Room To Grow, the lives of both the donors and the receivers would be greatly enhanced. No child should have to enter the world alone.

"I think everyone at a baby shower in this city should be given your card," I tell them.

"Yes, that's the point," Uma says as her face lights up. "We do live in one world." ●