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

Uma’s Mother Love

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 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 mop hair 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 Uma was up to. “She has certainly raised our profile,” says Julie. “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 Stalling
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 ex-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 1993’s

Gottaca 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 warmer coat, a mother learns to look for answers. One client, Natasha Jenkins, gets emotional whenever she talks about how Room To Grow has changed her life and the life of her 22-month-old daughter, Nikita. A single mother who works full-time while studying to become a...
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 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 lectures on baby-proofing a home and other 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 (212-227-2130), through the mail (1330 Fifth Ave, New York, NY 10029) or on the Web (www.roomtogrow.org). Please make checks payable to Room To Grow.

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