

Got a spare million?

Yep, you read it right:

**I'm looking for someone with
an EXTRA million dollars in his pocket.**

Dear Millionaire,

Chances are, this letter is NOT for you.

Chances are, *you don't have a spare million.*

And chances are, even if you had a spare million, you'd be looking for ways to turn it into two million, four million or even more.

Well, I'm not offering you insider secrets on a stock that's about to hit the roof.

Nor am I offering you a must-see real estate deal that'll unquestionably double your money in the next year or two.

And I'm certainly not offering you rare art, gold coins or anything else that might turn your \$1 million into two.

Nope.

Quite the opposite, actually.

**If you give me a million bucks, it'll be gone out of your bank account
forever, and you'll never earn another penny of interest on it again.**

You'll never be able to buy a yacht with it. Or a highly prized antique car. Or a great investment property. It'll be gone. *Vamoosh!*

Well, it'll be gone out your account, yet on its way to becoming something solid. Something immensely treasured. Something used and appreciated day in and day out for decades and decades to come.

Let me just tell you straight up why I want your million bucks – your *spare* million, that is.

My name is Richard Bienvenue. Most everyone calls me Benny ...

About 14 years ago, I left my job as school therapist, followed my heart, dug deep into my meager savings and created an organization called Our House.

Our House is a highly supervised and structured learning environment serving a handful of fortunate, dedicated and determined at-risk young men, ages 16-21. They are referred to us from social service and juvenile justice agencies, as well as from foster care.

Our program is not a joke. It is not “Jail Lite.”

Nor is it Easy Street for wayward youth.

To be accepted into Our House requires a serious internal inquiry from each young man and a thorough application and review process by our staff. Most importantly, each young man has to make an unbreakable set of vows to himself, to our program and to all the people – peers, staff, volunteers and community members – whom he’ll encounter in the year or so he’ll spend with us.

It’s such an intense program that about 60 percent of the guys who’ve made it all the way through the application process say, “No thanks ... not for me.”

They choose to go back to jail instead. Or to a bleak life on the streets.

I want to be clear about what I mean by “intense.” Our House is not boot camp. We are not a quasi-military organization. We don’t yell much ... except when we’re outside playing softball in the field behind our farmhouse. Though I *have* heard a yell (or “yelp” might be a better way of describing it!) when someone gets stung tending to one of the beehives in our student-run garden program.

Actually, what makes our program tough is that each young man has to go through a personal journey deciding Who He Is and Who He Wants To Be.

Each Our House resident has to learn discipline.

The kind of discipline that supports real life functioning. Like rising six days a week by 6:00 a.m. to eat a healthy breakfast and then head off to eight hours of “hands-on” construction and renovation experience.

Each Our House resident has to make a commitment to improve himself. Like studying at night – with the help of a volunteer tutor, if desired – to pass the GED. Or attending both group and private therapy sessions and AA meetings in the hopes of having a more balanced and full emotional life.

Each Our House resident has to acquire construction trade skills. So that he has a chance to earn a livable wage after graduating from our program. Skills such as carpentry, drywall, framing and roofing.

Each Our House resident has to decide what it means to be a man. And then to become that. Each to his own. Each on his own journey. And each with the greatest personal, community and structural support we can provide.

And each Our House resident has to learn self-responsibility. To clean up after his own mess, to say “I’m sorry” when he’s made a mistake, and to make sure that when he says “I’ll do it,” that he does ... all the way.

You see, the “toughness” of our program is because each young man is battling against himself.

... His own self-doubts ... his own mindset that he’ll never amount to much of anything and that the only way to survive is through a “life of crime.”

So, why do I want your million bucks?

Because 16 young men doing their best to learn discipline, self-control and the skills they need to live independently, need a place to call home. At least for the next year or two while they get themselves back on track,

become valuable workers and balance out their emotional worlds a bit.

And after that, another 16 young men will need a place to call home.

And after that, 16 more.

See, with your million dollars, we can build a residential dorm, a safe haven, a place to call “home.”

When we build our new dorm, we'll build it with the utmost care and concern.

The building process *is* how our students learn – hands-on, real world. They'll be able to come back years later with their children or grandchildren and say, “Son, I hung those doors over there,” or “I helped put that roof up.”

When we build our new dorm, it'll be sound and strong. Housing at-risk young men requires adherence to some industry guidelines and substantial upgrades, such as the most solid, unadorned wood doors money can buy ... and wood walls to weather the students' sometimes-flaring tempers and to soothe their sometimes-jittery nerves.

When we build our new dorm, each student will have a room of his own, simple but sufficient. Through years of working with at-risk young men, I feel it's important that students have downtime to be alone and introspective. Before going to bed each night, our students journal for 15 minutes or so about the day's activities, what they experienced and what they learned.

You might think I have to do a lot of monitoring of these young men. Of course, I am there – along with the staff – to teach and to guide. But you'd be amazed by how much self-monitoring goes on among our students, most particularly when they've built something themselves.

I have chuckled to myself more than once when overhearing one student firmly telling another to calm down and stop horsing around near a fence rail or porch that he personally helped build a few months back. I've even heard one student tell another to “Pick up after yourself and stop leaving such a mess in the common area!”

With your gift, our students will build their own home today and a home for all those who follow.

As I'm sure you know, few people today actually build a home with their own hands. In building their own dorm, Our House students will understand that they live with their mistakes ... and their successes. They'll experience taking something from start to completion. They'll create a legacy for future generations.

What I'm getting at is this: the lessons learned from building something and then living in that building are immeasurable. They are treasured gifts that will help move many of these at-risk adolescents into an adulthood and maturity that simply cannot be doled out in textbooks.

Your investment will yield a return to each young man ... and to society.

We make a big investment in each young man that comes through our doors. And each young man has to invest in himself as well. And when they graduate from our program, the majority of them go on to lead productive lives.

Eighty-four percent of Our House graduates are currently employed. According to the *Maryland Department of Juvenile Justice Recidivism Analysis* report conducted in 1997, juvenile recidivism rates in Maryland average 80 percent, and the majority of these repeat offenders have no viable job skills, nor have they earned a high school diploma. The recidivism rate for Our House graduates is only 11 percent: 727 percent lower than the state average!

The majority of the Our House students who take the GED exam earn a Maryland High School Diploma, a remarkable figure since a significant portion of our students have *serious* learning disabilities.

And that's not all. We have a guaranteed job in the construction industry for each Our House graduate. Local private contractors, carpenters, landscapers and painters' unions will gladly hire every one of our graduated students.

Our House residents give back ... and then give some more.

Though it may be quite a few years before any of the Our House graduates are able to donate a "spare million" themselves, our students learn the value and joy of volunteering and community service.

Our House students have logged more than 21,000 hours of volunteer service to the poor, the homeless, disadvantaged children, the elderly, and to nonprofit and government agencies, temples, churches, synagogues, local communities and municipalities, and county and state parks.

Our House students testified in committee and before Congress for the U.S. House of Representatives on the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, which provides funding to teens in transitional living programs who are aging out of foster care.

And you shoulda seen the smiles on the guys' faces when we learned that Our House had been chosen from thousands of nominees to receive the "Use Your Life" Award, courtesy of "Oprah's Angel Network." We were featured on a television program which showed in 132 countries, and subsequently we have been featured on three more *Oprah* shows, including a follow-up segment and a special network presentation.

Other acknowledgements of the Our House students' genuine and robust volunteer work include being —

- Selected as the 53rd "Point of Light" (out of 3,800 nominations) to receive a Presidential Citation in 1999, which recognized groups that solve social problems through their volunteer work.
- Selected by the U.S. Information Agency as a successful residential job training program for site visits by foreign delegations.
- Chosen to receive the Governor's Service and Volunteer Award in 1998.
- Chosen to receive one of 47 Thomas Jefferson Medals for Outstanding Public Service (out of 15,000+ nominees) by the American Institute for Public Service.
- Selected to partner with Howard County's Department of Aging in a program of retro-fitting selected senior citizens' homes with wheel chair ramps and other safety features to enable them to remain in their homes despite handicaps or infirmity.
- Chosen in 2001 as one of three programs highlighted in the National Civic League competition, in which

our community was selected as an “All American City” winner.

- Selected in 1997 as the “Howard County Volunteer Organization of the Year,” the first time ever that a youth organization won this recognition.
- Chosen as one of 78 charities in the *Catalogue of Philanthropy*, a guide to giving for the Greater Washington area. The guide commented that “Our House is widely recognized as one of the best programs for at-risk boys, anywhere.”

In addition to the national and international TV coverage we received from being on *Oprah*, the Our House program and its students have also been featured in, or on —

- CBS Channel 9, WUSA-TV, for receiving a “9 Who Care Award.”
- *People Magazine*, in a two-page article highlighting the students, staff and program.
- ABC Channel 7, WJLA-TV, where the students were shown building their new carpentry shop.
- *Washingtonian Magazine* in the December 2003 issue highlighting “20 Good Local Charities – Giving Where it Counts.” We were selected from more than 23,000 Washington area charities.
- Fox News Network, Channel 5, WTTG-TV, in a segment about local agencies helping people.

Come to think of it, we WILL turn your million dollars into two or three million!

Other than a few things the students can't legally do by themselves (such as plumbing and electrical work), the entire dormitory will be constructed by the Our House students and our team of professional teachers.

We take our time. We build slowly. Observing. Doing. Learning.

Each nail is hammered with attention and care. Each window is hung as part of the day's lesson. Each roof shingle is placed as the students learn about roof construction and safety.

We don't take shortcuts. Actually, it's quite the opposite. We want our students to learn the full breadth and depth of their trades. And we do this slowly and thoroughly.

While learning about everyday, modern construction skills, our students are also learning about new technologies, such as green buildings. (We will be making the new dorm as “green” as our budget allows.) And on the weekends this fall, our students have been timber-framing an old barn, so we cover all the construction styles: old time, current, and cutting edge!

With your gift of \$1 million, we can build a solid dorm that would cost well over \$2.5 million on the private market.

I can't promise you that your million dollars will help thousands of needy children.

At the most, it'll be about 25 – maybe 30 – a year.

I can't promise you that each and every young man who graduates from our program will go on to lead a law-abiding, stable life.

About 11 percent of them can't resist the pull of The Street and the (most often) short-lived criminal glory.

And, I certainly can't promise you that the young men living in the dorm your money builds will even remember your name.

Though they will remember their days at Our House and the lessons they learned about life and themselves.

No, I really can't promise you much of anything, other than the fact that each dime you give to Our House will multiply in value as we build a structure worth much more than money can buy. And it will multiply in value with each young man who chooses a life of honor and determination over a life of crime.

So, how do you measure just one life, turned around?

Let me introduce you to a few of our graduates. Young men. Just starting out in life. Most of them dealt a very raw, abusive and difficult start.

All of them were determined to be more than Destiny foretold. And Our House gave them that opportunity.

Meet Craig C., one of our most recent graduates. Craig clearly came from an emotionally abusive environment and would simply sit down if he didn't want to do something. Anything! Whether it was attending weekly AA meetings, helping out in the garden, or building a new front porch as part of the day's carpentry lessons. He'd sit. He'd whine. He'd become as immobile as a mountain.

Several months before graduating, we started to see big shifts in him. He walked a little taller. He was able to push himself emotionally through difficult times. And as he became more self-confident, he began to get excited about his future.

After graduating, he was hired by one of the organizations where the Our House students had previously done some weekend volunteer work. Now, he has his own apartment, a job and a whole new future in front of him.

We never gave up on him – though he tried every last nerve of many a staff member.

And, mostly importantly, Craig never gave up on himself.

Then there's Chris C., one of our first-ever graduates. We helped him find a place to live; then he got a job doing carpentry work; then he got a job doing renovations and repair work for a specialty shop. He was traveling up and down the east coast for his employer, learning advanced skills and business operations.

Now he owns and operates his own carpentry business, charges \$42/hour, is married, has a young child, and – *get this!* – he even fills in as a substitute teacher now and then at Our House.

Steve P. had heard all his life that he'd "never amount to much of anything." See, Steve has a severe learning disability and simply mastering the skills taught in the Our House program was a huge challenge for him.

Yet Steve was one of our youngest-ever graduates; he got a job right away and is now building decks. And the second he got his driver's license, he bought a car: a dream he never thought would come true.

Another student with severe learning disabilities, Alan D., loved animals. The self-discipline, self-esteem, respect for others and work ethic Alan learned at Our House helped him land a job at a nearby animal hospital.

He's happier than ever. He loves his job. And his employer is thrilled to find such a dedicated, considerate worker.

Mark P., seriously handicapped with an IQ of about 70, went on to live a productive and joyful life. Mark had been shot in the arm, as well, and had a difficult time with the physical work and trades taught at Our House.

But Mark loved to cook and was often found volunteering to put in extra time in our commercial kitchen. After graduating, he got hired by Marriott Corporation and now has a full-time job *with benefits*.

All of these young men have said to friends, family, employers and even to us – the staff – that they just wouldn't have made it without Our House. They'd be back on the street. Probably back in jail. And definitely with little hope in their lives.

I have even received phone calls from young men who were kicked out of our program for not adhering to our rules and the self-promises they made upon entering Our House.

One young man called me recently and essentially said, "I know I was a jerk, but I want to thank you for giving me a trade." He had learned enough about carpentry before being kicked out of the program to be hired by a construction company as a carpenter and is now gainfully employed.

So, you see, the lives of our young graduates aren't necessarily Hollywood rags-to-riches, made-for-TV stories. And they aren't necessarily box-office epics about victorious heroes.

They are, however, very much the stories of young men whose futures were bleak. Young men who now rise in the morning with direction and purpose. Young men who have life skills and greater emotional balance. Young men who know – through personal experience in our program – that will and determination and effort, step by step, will bring them to their goals.

This is what we create at Our House: young men with futures.

I'm asking you, here and now, to help us make this happen for the young men in our program.

And the 16 or so that will come next year.

And the 16 or so after that.

And so on.

It's really not much on the world-wide scale of things.

But it's deep. And the changes these young men experience at Our House *last*.

But don't take my word for it. Check us out, in person.

I highly doubt you're the kind of guy who buys a car without kicking the tires a couple of times.

I doubt you're the kind of guy who is just looking for a tax break by giving money to a charity group.

And I doubt you're the kind of guy who'd get overly excited about his name being on the front of a building.

My bet, even though I don't know you yet, is that –

- You've worked darn hard to get yourself to a place where you actually do have “a spare million.”
- You've spent many years concerned about your own family, raising your children and building your business, all at the same time.
- You've learned the value of thrift and sacrifice.

And if you're going to give anyone a “spare million,” you're going to be good and sure it's one of the better decisions you've ever made.

So, please *don't* write a check for a million today.

If you did, I wouldn't believe you were serious.

But do contact me. Do make an appointment to see our place. Do come out and personally meet the guys whose lives you'll profoundly impact and come “kick our tires” a bit.

Then decide.

My best,

Richard (Benny) Bienvenue

P.S. – This letter is really only meant for a handful of people, at the most. If you're not someone with “a spare million,” but you know someone who is, will you please pass along this letter? Me and 16 young men are counting on it.

consider putting the guys' signatures here

Reply Card text

Yes, Benny, I do have a “spare million,” and I am curious to find out if what you say is true. I want to come visit, “kick your tires” and see for myself if it’ll be me who turns a million into a priceless treasure.

Well, Benny, I don’t have a “spare million,” but I do believe in what Our House is and does. I’m sending along a check for --

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