

Students' passion inspires community to give big

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Community News

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Newark, Del. — If you had the chance to help turn a little cash into \$20,000 in less than a month, would you want to be a part of it? Probably only if you believed it was true.

Seeing -- or in this case doing -- was believing for 25 Newark Center for Creative Learning School (NCCL) middle schoolers who were each given \$50, a few weeks and a challenge: use it to make a difference.

They called it the "NCCL School's Big Give," and with the end-of-the-year service project, students experienced how big a role they could play in helping causes they care about with a little cash and a lot of passion, said teacher Kate Kerrane. The inspiration behind the new twist on her 7th and 8th grade class' social justice curriculum was Oprah Winfrey.

In 2006, the television talk show host gave viewers \$1,000 each, a camera and a week to find a worthy recipient. Rather than hand the \$1,000 over to someone, viewers multiplied the cash in a plethora of creative ways, raising so much money and touching so many lives that Oprah's Big Give spawned a new kind of reality show with a decidedly positive mission.

Lisa Lewis, the mother of an NCCL student, saw the show and brought the idea to Kerrane and her team, who helped students make it their own. Choice was the key to the project's great success, she said.

"Students picked causes that mattered to them," she said, which fueled their motivation, and having ownership of how they would multiply or use the money did the same.

The projects were as diverse as the students themselves: athletes, artists, environmentalists, animal lovers. They held a light-hearted "penny war," a homey bake sale, a fun raffle, made personable phone calls, high-tech Power Point presentations, and all kinds of door-to-door collections from drum sticks for the West End Neighborhood House to toys for foster children.

For some, it was a little scary at first to ask adults for money or goods. But once they got busy knocking on doors, writing letters, calling heads of non-profit organizations, and pitching their ideas to corporate sponsors, unexpected and exciting things began to happen.

Newark Natural Food Co-Op owners didn't just donate items for Clairellen Hurwitz and Kaitlin McClain's Forgotten Cats project, they volunteered to call distributors, who donated pallets of food, 1,000 cat collars and other feline goods that amounted to \$10,000.

When Asia Igou, Mary Mecca and Casey Garvey asked the co-op for diapers, wipes, baby lotion and personal hygiene items for mothers at Bayard House and Sojourners Place, the owners called Burt's Bees. The natural hygiene company has promised toiletries for the shelters.

When Noah Cutter, Peter Vanderkley, Bea Thomas and Tyler Hansen coordinated a "trash-athon," seeking donations for each bag of trash they picked up, Morgan Stanley promised \$5 per bag. The students are using the \$500 from 21 bags collected round Iron Hill to buy and plant trees around Newark.

"The kids were amazed at how many people got onboard once they just had the courage to ask," Lewis said. "It's a great lesson to learn at 12 and 13: they kept asking and people kept saying yes."

Project done, giving goes on

The school's strong service ethic is one reason why many parents choose NCCL. Yet, this project sparked something more in many of the students.

For example, Sarah Mattes of Pike Creek, who stocked backpacks with toiletries, school supplies and toys for children about to be placed in foster care, was so encouraged by what her efforts could do to comfort displaced children, she started looking for ways to keep the project going. Her first idea: instead of having flower on each table at her upcoming bat mitzvah, she's going to put an empty basket on each table and ask for donations.

That's what happens when you're given the chance to act on what you're passionate about: the project ends, but the giving goes on, Lewis said.

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