

With Oprah as inspiration, students give in a 'Big' way

By JENNIFER PRICE • The News Journal

Take \$50 and give it away to help others.

That was the assignment given to Newark Center for Creative Learning middle school students last month.

Three weeks later, the results include a patch of ground seeded with new trees, foster care children with backpacks full of goodies and neglected cats with full bellies.

"Our main goal was to get kids to see that they can make a difference in the world, and it doesn't matter if you have \$50 or not," said Kate Kerrane, a seventh and eighth grade teacher at NCCL.

"To learn that at this age is an incredible thing."

For the "NCCL School's Big Give", named after ABC's "Oprah's Big Give" show, 25 students participated in 12 projects raising more than \$3,000 and gathering lots of donations. The idea for the community service project came from Oprah Winfrey's "Pay it Forward Challenge," in which she gave each audience member \$1,000 and challenged them to come up with inspiring and creative ways to help others. To get started, NCCL, a private school for first- through eight-graders, received a \$1,000 grant from Wal-Mart and \$500 from Bank of America.

Sarah Mattes, a 12-year-old NCCL student, stuffed 22 backpacks with shampoo, soap, toothbrushes, school supplies, games and stuffed animals. The backpacks will be given to children as they are about to enter foster care.

"I hear stories about how [foster care children] only have a few minutes to pack up their stuff," Sarah said. "If I imagine me in that spot, it would be really difficult and scary, and I would feel really good if someone had made a backpack for me."

Sarah raised \$150 through donations. She got Embassy Suites Hotels to donate miniature shampoo, conditioner and shower gel bottles. And her orthodontist, Alpine & Rafetto Orthodontics, donated 144 toothbrushes. She gave the filled backpacks to the state's Department of Youth, Children and Their Families.

"I learned that there's a lot of people out there who do need help, and a lot of people either know about it and turn their backs or always think they should do something but never really get it done," she said. "But if someone gives you a little push to get started, it's really easy to help someone." Four other students -- Peter Vanderkley, Noah Cutter, Tyler Hansen and Beatrice Thomas -- spent four hours walking up and down Ironside Road in Newark collecting 21 bags of trash and recycling. Morgan Stanley donated \$5 for every bag, and some parents also pledged anywhere from a few cents to a few dollars per bag of trash collected. In the end, they earned more than \$300 from picking up trash.

The students then used their money to buy trees for Newark.

"Our main goal was to help the environment, so we all agreed that planting trees makes Newark look nicer and creates more oxygen for the environment," Peter, 14, said. "If adults and kids just spent a few hours one day picking up trash, it would really make a difference."

Two cat-lovers raised more than \$350 for Forgotten Cats, a nonprofit that aims to reduce the unwanted cat population without killing the felines. Instead, they neuter cats and try to find them homes.

Clairellen Hurwitz and Kaitlin McClain -- both 14 -- held a raffle at NCCL and placed donation jars at local businesses.

"Even the \$1 donations help out," Kaitlin said.

Newark Natural Foods donated 20 bags of cat food, cat litter, blankets, towels and toys to the girls' cause.

Pet Care II, a Newark pet store where Kaitlin works, gave 25 percent off to anyone who donated to Forgotten Cats.

Other projects included giving sports equipment to Wilmington's West End Neighborhood House, providing school supplies for poor Vietnamese children, sending four Middletown disadvantaged children to a summer art camp and raising money for a 4-year-old boy with cancer.

Throughout the projects, students wrote letters to businesses, made calls to the community and budgeted their money. They also filmed the entire process, which will be edited and shown to the entire school on Thursday.

"These are the kinds of educational things kids are going to remember for the rest of their lives," Kerrane said.

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Students from Newark Center for Creative Learning give sports equipment to the West End Neighborhood House, a nonprofit housing group, last week.



Newark Center for Creative Learning student Beatrice Thomas collects trash along Ironside Road last week as part of her project to help others.

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NCCL'S BIG GIVE PROJECTS

- Donating food and toys to Delaware Humane Society
- Gathering cat food, litter and toys for Forgotten Cats
- Donating bird seed and other supplies to Tri-State Bird Rescue
- Delivering diapers, car seats, clothes and toiletries to Sojourner's Place/Bayard House
- Purchasing sports equipment for West End Neighborhood House
- Raising money to send four children to the Gibby Center for the Arts Youth Summer Camp
- Collecting toys and food for animals at Faithful Friends
- Raising money for Cole Fitzgerald, a 4-year-old boy with cancer
- Picking up trash and planting trees in Newark
- Raising money for Sunflower Mission, a nonprofit that builds schools and gives school supplies to Vietnam children
- Donating money to Ronald McDonald House
- Stuffing backpacks with gifts for foster care children