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SPECIAL FEATURE

Angelic Gifts: McCarrick students demonstrate giving spirit

By Erick Rommel
 Head Staff Writer

For employees at Toys 'R' Us, the sight of people running through the aisles grabbing gifts is nothing unusual during December. However, the group of teenagers from Cardinal McCarrick High School, South Amboy, who made themselves at home in the Woodbridge store Dec. 3 were a little different than most. They were not buying gifts for family and friends or even themselves; they were buying for children with HIV/AIDS who receive treatment in New Brunswick.

The "giving spree," as it was referred to by science teacher Michelle Brielmeier, ended a charitable campaign that started as a small class project and ended with the entire school giving from their pockets and their hearts.

"Everyone got pumped up to donate money," said Dominick Cirillo, junior. "It was fun."



"We all put in ideas to raise money for this," said Meghan Orlowski, junior, who raised money in her parish, Our Lady of Victories, Sayreville, after Masses.

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The groundwork for the fundraiser began during the summer, when Brielmeier began looking for a charity or service event in which to involve her students. "I was looking for something where the greatest amount of money reaches those in need," she said.

At the end of her search, Brielmeier decided on Angel Wish, an organization dedicated to providing the public "with an easy way to grant wishes to the millions of children who are living with HIV/AIDS around the world."

The idea for Angel Wish began with Shimmy Mehta. While a student at Rutgers University, Newark, in the mid-1990s he became passionate about helping victims of pediatric AIDS. After graduation, he realized full-time employment took a lot of the time that he used to use for his charitable activities.

"When I started working, I realized I didn't have as much time as I used to, and I didn't have the opportunity to give back or volunteer," he recalled. "I could make the time, but I thought if I could find a way to make it easy for other people to get something for the kids, that's something we could easily do."

He incorporated Angel Wish in 1999 and is currently its chief executive officer. Most of its donations come from individuals making wishes come true through Toys 'R' Us and Amazon.com wish lists.

Requests from children from birth to age 18 on the New Brunswick wish list range from an activity mirror for a newborn and a Star Wars slumber bag for a five-year-old to a Barbie acoustic guitar for a 10-year-old and a CD player for an 17-year-old.

"All they want are these simple, little things," said Orlowski.

"We want so much for Christmas. These kids (only) want film or a dictionary or a book," Walter Diones, freshman said. "That touched me a lot. They want so little; we want so much."

Angel Wish does not just provide support for children infected with HIV/AIDS. It also provides support for those affected by the disease through the infection of their parents or other close family members.

"AIDS affects the entire family. It's not just the infected children but the affected children. They're going to lose a parent to AIDS," Mehta said. "The more we can do to strengthen their resolve in their childhood, the better they'll be to deal with that loss in the future."

The collection of donations Nov. 3-16 became a competition between each of Cardinal McCarrick High School's science classes. Coins collected counted toward the final point total, paper money counted against their final score.

"We were all on the same team," said Orlowski. "It was competitive, but good competition."

Diones agreed. "No matter who won, no one lost," he said. "The money is definitely in good hands."

In addition to the money raised by students, the student-run branch of the Raritan Bay Credit Union matched \$500 and the Bayshore Fitness and Wellness Center of Old Bridge and Hollywood Tans donated prizes for a fundraising raffle.

"We gave a lot of money because we thought those kids were in need," Diones said. "Some may not reach Christmas. You have to make them happy for the days they're going to be here."

When the competition was over, the students discovered they had collected \$5,817, more than 1,100 times beyond the \$500 they expected to raise.

"I was totally surprised. Dumbfounded," said Mehta who explained the typical group donation to Angel Wish is under \$1000. "That's amazing to me. It really is."

Because of their generosity, Angel Wish asked the students to buy the gifts themselves. "This way, the kids are completely involved from start to finish," Mehta explained. "They went the whole nine years to get the toys in the kids' hands."

In addition, Mehta likes having the opportunity to interact with student groups that raise money. "We want to educate them about giving and giving back to the community," he said. "It's not about the money but how they went about getting the money."


Mehta met the students from Cardinal McCarrick at Toys 'R' Us for their giving spree, where they made every wish from New Brunswick come true. "When they said that was their goal, I said, 'That's great,'" Mehta recalled. "Now, it's a piece of cake to do that."

All gifts purchased by the Cardinal McCarrick High School students will be given to the care center in New Brunswick. The care center "will give the gift to the parent secretly to give to the kids," Mehta said. "It's more important for the parent to get credit for the gift than the donor. The gift goes a tremendously long way to make the child smile and strengthen the family bond."

Though those receiving the gifts will never know where they came from, the students from Cardinal McCarrick say they will not forget what they have done.

"It shows we're all so capable of so much," Orlowski said. "If we all work together, next time we can do better."

Angel Wish operates 82 care centers in 41 states in addition to locations in other countries. Wish lists and more information about the program can be found at www.AngelWish.org.

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