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Gifts to Give: Experiencing the power of giving

Fri, 06/11/2010 - 12:21 — O Jornal, Melissa Costa

New Bedford — Imagine a place where kids can work for social justice and learn the power of giving and community service. It was this simple but strong vision that one day all children will be connected to the things they need that became the driving force for creating Gifts to Give. The organization collects donations to help SouthCoast kids.

“Our mission is to put a 1,000 children a month through service in the mill,” stated Paula Ritchotte, program manager of Gifts to Give and retired RN. “Through their service learning they begin to learn about social justice.”

Dartmouth Middle School had a book drive in which they collected more than 3,000 books. The students’ hard work and effort made 1,000 children’s lives better when many of those books were donated to a SouthCoast school in need.

“What a joy to be able to tell the students of Dartmouth Middle, ‘this is what your gift did. You made a difference here,’” stated Ritchotte with pride.

Gifts to Give is about giving students a “tangible, immediate and sustainable opportunity to work for social justice,” according to their mission. The students work through programs like service learning,

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positive action, community organizing and working at the New Bedford mill, processing, packaging and filling orders for SouthCoast kids in need.

"I like coming here. I separate the clothes, clean toys and go through books," stated Chelsea Tavares, a student at New Bedford High School, who volunteers every afternoon.

Throughout the warehouse which is located at 21 Cove Street in New Bedford and is the size a football field, one can feel the joy, pride and willingness to help. Every child, teenager, young adult and seasoned adult takes on a project from cleaning toys to sorting, sizing and organizing clothes, to inspecting books. Sixty percent of their donations are clothes. When ordering a package of clothes, a child receives four pairs of pants, six tops, one sweater, one light jacket, two pairs of pajamas, one package of new underwear and one package of new socks. Every child for whom an order is placed also receives a six pack of books.

"Approximately 200 people work on an order and some of the items must be new for obvious reasons, like socks, underwear, toiletries, arts and crafts and school supplies," stated Ritchotte.

In order to help fund their "new sock and new underwear program," Gifts to Give holds yard sales on Saturdays, selling donations that are not appropriate for children.

According to Gifts to Give, approximately 1,450,743 children live in 845,969 families in Massachusetts, with 14 percent (203,104) living in poor families and 15 percent (217,611) living in low-income families.

"For a child growing up in a poor or low-income family: homelessness, safety, food, health, education, basic essentials, engagement and well being are more than just words," according to the organization's mission.

Experiencing the power of giving is not the only trait that makes Gifts to Give unique, they take it one step further by personalizing every order, taking time to know a little about each child and making sure the clothes, books and toys fit the child's personality.

"When we get any type of foreign language book we set it aside and when we get an order for those types of books we give them out," stated Ritchotte. "We have ESL (English as a second language) students who come here with appropriate teachers. Almost everything we do, and every pamphlet we have has been interpreted in Portuguese and Spanish."

Gifts to Give is not about reinventing the wheel, it is all about enhancing it and another prime example is their Birthday project.

"We don't do Christmas, there are many charities out there that do. We didn't feel the need to reinvent the wheel," stated Ritchotte. "What we do 365 days a year, that no else does, is we celebrate birthdays. That is a very special day for the individual child. That day they don't have to share with every child in the world."

A birthday present can be ordered and the child will receive a brand new educational toy wrapped in the organization's designer wrapping paper (white paper colored and drawn on by volunteering children).

The projects and events are numerous; the organization is always looking for ways to keep the wheel spinning and the lives of impoverished children fulfilled. Like last fall, when they decided to plant 1,000 pumpkin plants for

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an event, which unfortunately resulted in only four grown pumpkins and the purchase of more by Jim Stevens, the CEO and founder of Gifts to Give.

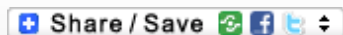
Despite their failure growing pumpkins, the organization has succeeded in every other way.

Since Mother's Day of 2009, the organization has helped approximately 4,000 children. A testament to its belief that no child need be lost to poverty.

Gifts to Give partners with area hospitals for the Welcome Baby Pack, and other organizations. They also created Project Cinderella, which gives young ladies an opportunity to pick beautiful prom dresses and they have a wall of fame with pictures of all the children, volunteers and supporters.

"Let's not forget, this is one man's vision, one man's drive, one man's life Goal... Jim Stevens," concluded Ritchotte.

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