

ORR students find rewards in giving

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MATTAPOISETT — Through their involvement in community service, a group of students from Old Rochester Regional High School are learning that it is better to give than to receive.

The young women are members of the Community Service Learning Club and have been volunteering their time to help less fortunate families in the New Bedford area.

Lauren Pettinato, a junior, and seniors Rebecca Ivester and Julia Kantner are among those who have been working with GiftstoGive, an organization that collects donated goods and clothing and distributes them to families in need. Another ORR student, Christine Beatriz, who was not available the day of a recent interview, has also been heavily involved.

"The Tritown area is pretty affluent and to discover that so much need exists so close to home has really been an experience," Pettinato said, explaining why she takes part.

GiftsToGive accepts donations from schools, faith and social organizations, corporations, and individuals. Volunteers then sort and process the gently used items. Social service agencies can go online at giftstogive.com to enter information about a needy child. This permits the volunteers to assemble a package tailored to the particular needs of that child.

While many groups and individuals have stepped forward to help, the ORR students "are a force to be reckoned with," said James P. Stevens, CEO and founder of GiftsToGive, Inc.

"The absolute belief that these remarkable young women have, that they can change the world they live in, is truly the great hope for their generation."

Stevens said "their steadfast and dogged determination resulted in organizing a collection drive at ORR High School that will help over 250 SouthCoast children who live in desperate situations. It does not get more real than that."

And they are by no means resting on their laurels.

This Saturday, Nov. 21, the teens and others involved with the Community Service Learning Group will hold a "Repurpose-recycle-reuse" drive. The ORR students will be collecting clothing, (especially winter coats, hats and gloves), bikes, books, toys, puzzles, strollers, safety gates, car seats, and cribs for local children in need.

Recalling how they got involved, Ivester said, "Last year our science teacher Mary Cabral, who's the community service adviser, told us about an article she read in the newspaper about GiftstoGive and she thought it might be something for us to explore. So we went down to the mill to check it out."

The non-profit organization currently operates out of an old mill building on Cove Street in New Bedford.

The teens immediately liked what they saw, according to Ivester. "There's just something special about the atmosphere at GiftsToGive. I've never been around a nicer group of people," she said.

At GiftsToGive, the ORR contingent sorts through donated clothes, cleans toys and makes sure that everything that goes out is clean and in good condition. "We are very conscious of that. If people are poor we don't want any perception that they have to accept anything that is not pristine," Ivester said.

Their encounter with GiftstoGive has been so positive that the young women have extended their involvement with the organization far beyond their initial commitment.

"Being part of this has really been an eye-opener," said Kantner. "We tend to take things for granted living where we do. But it's a really good feeling to see how much things that people might throw away can mean to someone else."

As word spreads about the work done by Gifts to Give, the organization has been gaining support from a number of sources.

For instance, the Mattapoisett Library's summer reading program substituted gifts for the children with pledges of cash from their parents to GiftsToGive.

"One of our patrons heard about what these girls were doing and told me because she knew I was looking for a charity to support," children's librarian Linda Burke said. In addition to cash, the library collected clothing and books brought in by patrons.

At this Saturday's event, the ORR Community Service Group will have a box truck at both the Mattapoisett Fire Station and the Rochester Police Station from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Tax receipts will be provided.

Clothes, books, toys, strollers, highchairs and cribs are in high demand, the girls said. "We've had to stop filling orders because we don't have enough stuff," Ivester said. Clothing for teenage boys is another urgent need.

"It's hard to get good used clothing for teenage boys because boys are so tough on clothes and a lot of times they ruin all the clothes that they have," Kantner said. Items such as toiletries, baby diapers or any baby items are also in constant demand.

"It's amazing to think that it's so close to us," Pettinato said of the harsh conditions to which so many people are subjected through poverty. "People don't get involved because they are not aware of the need."

To counter that, the students have begun to contact honor societies at other schools in the region to encourage them to start a student leadership council of GiftsToGive.

"We want them to bring GiftsToGive back to their own schools and recruit other people to help with these drives," Ivester said.

For more information, email Rebecca Ivester at Rebecca@giftstogive.org or phone her at (508)317-9606.

You can also visit www.Giftstogive.org to learn more about the service organization.

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