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Students learn to 'pay it forward'

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FAIRMOUNT - It would have been easy to just donate money for Christmas, but Guardian Angels School students learned this week that rolling up their sleeves is a more life-affirming lesson.

Accompanied by parents and two teachers, 51 eighth-graders spent a half day volunteering at Bethany House, a Fairmount homeless shelter for women and children.

The students baked Christmas cookies, cupcakes and lasagna for that night's dinner, stripped and waxed floors, decorated Christmas stockings for the children, cleaned and repaired toys, raked leaves and loaded a truck with Christmas presents.

Their efforts were part of the Mount Washington school's first Pay It Forward Project to engage its youth in philanthropy. The committee for the GA 5K Run/Walk, a school fundraiser held in the spring, donated \$900 to jumpstart the project.

"Our group of kids are sort of sheltered," said Karen Veeneman, a parent who runs the committee. "They don't realize how well they have it and how lucky they are, and there are other people in the world that aren't as blessed as they are."

Each sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade religion class received \$100 in seed money. Guided by a parent coordinator, each class brainstormed and determined how it wanted to use its money to pay it forward.

The eighth-graders held a bake sale and raised another \$175. They bought some cleaning supplies and food to make for the shelter residents' dinner.

While at Bethany House, eighth-graders got to see shelter residents going about their daily routines, doing laundry and such.

"I think it's really unique, because not many people would go to a women's shelter," said 13-year-old Mary Roeding, taking a break from mopping a floor. "I like seeing the women and children that we're helping."

That affirmed the 5K committee's intention.

"It's very easy to just give a \$100 to an organization, but for them to actually see it and feel it, they're able to experience it, rather than just hand over money," Venneman said. "We've encouraged all of the religion classes to somehow see how they're making a difference."

Jim Hay, one of the eighth-grade parent coordinators and "foreman" at the site, said this is the first year for the Pay It Forward concept.

Students enthusiastically embraced the project.

Brian Paulik, 13, helped load the truck with Christmas presents.

"It's a good idea because we can help them with what we do and help them do things they can't, like come out and rake up the leaves and help clean the house."

The five-member team of Gabbi Hodge, Maggie Larkin, Maddie Mackey, Kristen Massa and Madison Ward made 10 dozen cookies, four dozen cupcakes and lasagna.

"It helps us notice what we have and some other people don't and what we take for granted," Maddie said.

"It makes me want to help out more often."

Additional Facts

More 'Pay It Forward' examples

A sampling of what other Guardian Angels classes are doing to Pay It Forward:

- A sixth-grade class planted three Redbud trees Tuesday at Juilfs Park in Anderson Township.
- A seventh-grade class will hold a book drive and host two ice cream socials in January for families staying at the Ronald McDonald House.
- Another seventh-grade class helped out needy classrooms by buying books and sports equipment.

All classes have until March 1 to complete their community service project. Each group will present its project to the school and community in March.
