

Lopez Elementary students help raise money, awareness

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When Joe Harris' wife Judy died nearly four years ago, he knew he wanted to honor her memory and keep giving to Respite Care Inc., the local organization "near and dear" to Judy's heart, he said.

"My wife was very committed to Respite Care," Harris said. "I thought it was a natural place to set up her memorial fund."

At the same time, teachers at Lopez Elementary, where Judy had been teaching for 13 years, decided to start a tradition that encouraged their students to give back to the community.

The result was Lopez's annual fundraiser for Respite Care Inc. About a month before Valentine's Day, students at Lopez start collecting donations from their community and raising awareness for Respite Care Inc., an organization that gives relief and temporary care for children with developmental disabilities. Harris, in honor of his wife, donates an additional \$1,000 each year to what the students raise.

Having raised about \$2,500 this year, the students were surprised Wednesday to receive an additional \$1,000 from the Otter Box, a local business. The \$3,500 raised in total by Lopez fourth- and fifth-graders will financially help families who use Respite Care to send their children to summer camp, said LeAnn Massey, executive director of the organization.

"I can't tell you what an impact this makes to our families," Massey told a group of about 60 students and staff during a chili luncheon. As the final fundraising event, the students help serve drinks and desserts to the people attending the luncheon before presenting a big check to Massey and the organization.

Respite Care is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, Massey said. Parents often turn to Respite Care when they are unable to care for their children with disabilities for a short period of time, she said. Last summer, one mother had surgery while her child was away at summer camp, she said. Because her child requires lots of attention, the mom wouldn't have been able to have her surgery and recover while simultaneously taking care of her child, Massey said.

At the camp, children with developmental disabilities are integrated with the other campers and given the chance to try canoeing, hiking and archery. One child suffering from brittle-bone disease was able to go horseback riding with the help of a Respite Care staff member, Massey said.

Autumn Robison, 10, said she and her classmates took an eye-opening field trip last week to Respite Care. Talking to children with developmental disabilities made Autumn realize differences are only skin deep.

"Everyone's the same, even if they're different," she said. She said seeing a boy who ate through a tube in his throat made her realize how important it was that she helps.

"I think it's really important for other kids to start helping and for kids not to make fun of people that are handicapped," Autumn said.

Susie Gunstream, a fifth-grade teacher at Lopez and the event organizer, said she and other teachers set out to instill a sense of volunteerism in students early in life.

"Everybody was talking about paying it forward and taking a stand," Gunstream said. The teachers hoped to show students that in spite of their young ages, they, too, could make a difference.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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