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10-year-old's efforts help save Peekskill soup kitchen

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THE JOURNAL NEWS

(Original publication: December 27, 2006)

Faced with the hard truth that a Peekskill soup kitchen was nearly broke and would be forced to shut its doors, organizers put out a plea for donations to keep the longtime program alive at least a bit longer.

What followed over the past three months has been a miraculous rally among 80 or so houses of worship and hundreds of individuals from throughout the greater Peekskill area.

What turned out to be one of the most surprising - and inspiring - aspects of the fundraising effort is that the largest individual contributor hasn't been a wealthy businessperson or prominent politician, but a 10-year-old girl from Cortlandt named Liz Feller.

She ended up donating a grand total of \$863, which she raised by making and selling beaded jewelry.

"I decided that since I like beading, it would be something that would work well - especially since it's right before the holidays," Liz said as she carefully slid wiring through tiny black beads to make a necklace last week. "It's not as much of an effort as it is something to do that's fun and helpful."

Her fundraising enterprise all started when she received \$60 as a birthday gift from a friend. Feeling that was too much money for a child to spend on herself, she immediately started thinking of charitable ways to use it.

A short time after that, the Furnace Woods Elementary School fifth-grader learned about the soup kitchen's struggles.

Her first thought was to simply donate the money. But then it dawned on her that she could do a lot more to help if she got a little creative, and so Liz invested the money into buying beads of assorted colors, shapes and sizes. She also asked her grandmother to give her money for Christmas so she could amass a larger collection.

Liz sold her creations to friends, her mom's co-workers and fellow members of the Reformed Church of Cortlandtown. The jewelry became so popular, she had a hard time keeping up with the orders.

The Rev. Douglas Leonard, the church pastor, remembers when Liz first told him about her idea. She and her mother had taken him out for lunch at a local diner, and the youngster "was literally bouncing up and down in the seat telling me about it," he said.

Leonard is also the president of the Peekskill Area Pastor's Association, an interfaith organization known as PAPA, which started the lunch program in 1981 and has worked ever

How to help

Donations to the Noontime Meals Program may be sent to: The Rev. Mark Ioset, treasurer, Peekskill Area Pastor's Association, Peekskill Presbyterian Church, 705 South St., Peekskill, NY 10566

To discuss sponsorship, contact Dan Alverio at the Salvation Army, 914-737-0280. Salvation Army, 117 Nelson Ave., Peekskill, NY 10566

since to sustain it. It was PAPA who asked the leaders of its numerous churches, mosques and synagogues to solicit donations from its members for the soup kitchen.

The program costs \$36,000 a year to run, which covers a \$22,000 salary for an on-site director, \$3,000 for annual rent, paper goods and some food. Local houses of worship prepare and donate most of the meals.

St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Peekskill has paid for the program for the past three years, with the help of a \$20,000 annual grant from Kraft Foods. But Kraft stopped contributing this year, and the church was unable to make up the difference on its own.

The fundraising push has since brought in about \$34,000. It's expected that Temple Israel of Northern Westchester in Croton-on-Hudson will donate another \$4,000 or so raised by its youth through a Hanukkah carnival. That ensures the program will run through the upcoming year, according to Leonard.

At this point, PAPA is hoping that more groups will step up and sponsor a month of meals, which costs \$3,000. Only one business, SUMTCHR, Inc., and two Islamic community centers in Mohegan Lake and Thornwood have each become sponsors.

"As far as we're concerned, it doesn't matter what faith they're of or gender orientation or anything. What's important is that these are people who are down and out and need to be helped, and that's part of our mission," said Zead Ramadan, public relations director for the Hudson Valley Islamic Community Center in Mohegan Lake.

While every cent is appreciated, it's Liz Feller's fundraising that has really struck Leonard.

"Think about what she could do with that money - she could buy a plasma TV for her bedroom or something," the pastor said. "It kinda puts us to shame, anybody who says they can't do much this year. If you have the will and the heart to do this, you can."

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