

When I wish upon a

Web Site



N'Devian Anderson for recess with



Jennifer Shileny, a second-grade teacher at Riverdale School, shows off classroom materials funded through DonorsChoose.org.

By Mary Massingale

Jennifer Shileny used to dig into her own pockets, head to the dollar store and buy a few small footballs for her second-graders to play with during recess.

"We don't have a playground for them to play on," said Shileny, who teaches at Riverdale School in south suburban Riverdale.

Then she discovered DonorsChoose.org, a nonprofit Web-based organization started by public school teachers to help their PreK-12 colleagues raise money for classroom supplies and projects. Shileny posted her request for recess equipment on the Web site, and anonymous donors gradually funded the project. Shileny's second-graders now have footballs, jump ropes and hula hoops for recess.

"It really is energizing to see there are people out there willing to help these kids," said Shileny, who is a member of the District 148 Education Association.

The concept is a win-win for all involved, according to Kee-cia Broy, director of the central states region of DonorsChoose.

"Teachers feel empowered and are being asked about the needs of their classrooms," Broy said. "It gives donors the opportunity to make an impact on K-12 education in a positive and tangible way."

The Web site is the brainchild of Charles Best, a former high school social studies teacher in the Bronx. Seeing first-hand the lack of classroom materials, Best paired that need with what he perceived to be a frustration among charitable givers over a lack of direction of their donation. The result was the launch of DonorsChoose.org in the spring of 2000.

The first proposal posted on the Web site was from a Bronx high school teacher in need of 18 SAT preparation books for one of his English classes. The project was fully funded at a cost of \$33.

The Web site expanded across New York state and into North Carolina, Alabama, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas, and into cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Washington, D.C. The program went nationwide in September 2007. As of the end of March 2008, nearly 95,000 proposals had been posted on the Web site, with almost 46,000 projects funded with \$20.8 million in donations.

The concept is simple. Teachers create an account at DonorsChoose.org, writing a one-page essay outlining their project of at least \$100 and the exact resources needed. Volunteer teachers screen the proposals before posting them to the Web site. The submitting teachers' names are not used, but their school, district, county and the grade level they teach are listed.

Individual donors — who DonorsChoose refers to as "citizen philanthropists" — can then browse or search the proposals, choosing those they want to fund. A shaded bar at the top of each proposal charts its funding progress.

The organization works with partnering companies to buy and ship the funded project



son, Charles White, Diamond Derrick, Tia Barnes and Bailey Murry are ready equipment funded through DonorsChoose.org.

to the teacher, along with thank-you notes to be filled out by the students and returned to donors who gave at least \$100. The citizen philanthropists also receive a photograph of the students using the materials.

Projects remain on the Web site for five months. If they're not fully funded by then, donations are reallocated according to the giver's wishes.

But 65 percent of teachers who have used the site received full funding of their projects, according to Broy.

Shileny is batting above average. Of the nine proposals she's submitted, six have been fully funded.

In addition to the recess equipment, she's received a large floor rug her students sit on for activities; topic-based tubs of science games and equipment, including microscopes; literacy stations including sight words and games; a "reader's retreat" of four bean bag chairs and giant pillows; and a reading take-home backpack for each student that includes a library book and related activities.

The secret to her success? "Think of a catchy title," Shileny said, noting she called the science equipment proposal "mini mad scientist." "You really have to write it so

you're selling your kids."

If it's a big proposal — more than the average \$400 — split it into two projects.

Timing doesn't hurt either. Proposals put up near December have a good chance of being funded quickly.

"People who want to make donations want to do so near the end of the year for tax reasons," Shileny said.

Ashley Wallis of Wilbur Trimpe Middle School in Bethalto is hoping to copy Shileny's success. The seventh-grade special education teacher has posted a request for a television and DVD player for her classroom.

The school library has one television, "but if you need it right away, you can't get it. It takes a couple of weeks," Wallis said.

She said the program clips she could show her students would help them make connections to life since many of them lack actual life experience.

"Learning is making connections to your own background," Wallis said.

She's already planning her next proposal — a set of talking calculators.

"My students need to be able to do some higher-level algebra or geometry," Wallis said. ■

CATCH THE GRANT-WRITING FEVER

Jamie Impson and her seventh- and eighth-graders are batting a thousand in grant-writing for classroom projects.

The Athens Junior High School English teacher and her 24 gifted English students this spring won a \$500 Youth Leaders for Literacy grant sponsored by the National Education Association and Youth Service America.

It was Impson's first attempt at trying for a grant.

"I was shocked," Impson said.

However, her students are now putting together a literacy project called "Kid Kits" for younger students in the district. Each of the seven kits focuses on a topic — such as international cultures, endangered animals or farm life — and features books, puppets, word search games, crossword puzzles and a book written by the students.

Impson gives all the credit to her students.

"I wrote a letter as their adult sponsor, but the kids actually wrote the grant proposal," she said.

When the kits are completed, Impson's students will present them to students in the district's elementary and intermediate schools, as well as give one to the local library for any home-schooled students who want to use them.

"That's an important part for them, to sort of bask in their glory," Impson said.

But that source of pride would have been missed if Impson and her students hadn't taken a chance and applied for the grant.

"You never know until you try," Impson said. "There are so many grants out there. The worst thing that can happen is you don't get it."

Feel inspired? Then take a look at these Web sites for grant opportunities. If the deadline has passed for this school year, then consider yourself ahead of the game for the coming year!

- ▶ The National Education Association offers links to several opportunities: www.nea.org/resources/free-stuff.html
- ▶ TeachersCount is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to raise the status of the teaching profession and provide resources to the education community: www.teacherscount.org/teacher/awards.shtml
- ▶ The federal government lists this Web site as the single access point for more than 900 grant programs offered by the 26 federal grant-making agencies: <http://grants.gov>
- ▶ Discovery Education partnered with the technology administrator for Cape Cod public schools to come up with this shopping list of grant resources: <http://school.discoveryeducation.com/schrockguide/business/grants.html>
- ▶ More than 30 Federal agencies formed a working group in 1997 to make hundreds of federally supported teaching and learning resources easier to find. The result of that work is the FREE website: www.free.ed.gov
- ▶ Teachers Network is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving student learning in public schools nationally and internationally: www.teachersnetwork.org/grants
- ▶ Education Week covers a variety of education topics every week in its print and online version. It also has a section on grants. www.edweek.org/ew/section/grants/index.html



Athens Junior High School students in Jamie Impson's gifted English class show off books that will go in the farm life Kid Kit they created. Peyton Crowe, front; Kelsey Penrod, back; and Jodi Hinrichs, right.