



Web site for donors a gold mine for schools

By **Stephanie Banchemo**

Tribune staff reporter

A straight-A pupil whose favorite subject is social studies, Frida DeSantiago dreamed of attending a national youth leadership conference in Washington.

The Chicago 12-year-old knew her parents, both restaurant workers, could not afford the airfare and hotel costs. Frida began selling candy bars, hoping—against all odds—that she could cajole enough family and friends into helping her raise the \$1,000 fee.

Frida's wish came true weeks after her social studies teacher posted her story on the Chicago section of DonorsChoose.org, a unique Web site that has generated more than \$1 million in donations for hundreds of Chicago Public Schools.

Three generous donors—from Oak Park, Georgia and Massachusetts—read about Frida's situation and pledged a portion of the \$1,000 the 7th grader needed to attend the prestigious

Congressional Youth Leadership Conference in February.

"I can't believe people who don't know me want to help me," said Frida, who intends to enroll at Princeton University and become a lawyer. "But I think it's cool. And I am happy and excited and nervous about going. It's kind of like a dream come true."

DonorsChoose Chicago is making a lot of dreams come

PLEASE SEE **DONORS**, PAGE 16



Jada Cooper and André Grubbs, both 3, play in Gladstone Elementary with toys donated through the Web site DonorsChoose.org.

Tribune photos by Charles Osgood

DONORS: Web site has raised almost \$11 million

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

true.

Since it opened for business in late 2004, the Web site has matched hundreds of donors with projects in hundreds of schools. The money has paid for everything from books to yoga mats to microscopes to sign-language materials to money for class trips. Ninety percent of the donations have gone to low-income schools.

DonorsChoose Chicago is part of a national Internet site founded by a high school social studies teacher in New York.

Chicago region stands out

Launched in 2000, the site has expanded to four cities and eight states. It has helped raise more than \$10.5 million for classroom resources and field trips, helping more than 500,000 students nationwide.

Charles Best, founder of the Web site, said Chicago has been the site's "standout region," garnering teacher proposals and funding faster than any other region. It was five years before half of the New York schools posted wish lists, but it took Chicago only a few months before more than half of its schools posted wish lists on the site.

About 65 percent of the Chicago projects have been fully or partially funded.

"I don't know if it's because the Chicago education community is tight-knit or if word travels fast, but we've had a lot of interest in Chicago," Best said.

A sort of philanthropic eBay, DonorsChoose allows would-be donors to browse through thousands of teacher wish lists. The site lets users sort the proposals by teacher, school, subject or region of the country. With the click of a mouse, the contributor can target the money directly to the school, the classroom or, in Frida's case, the child.

DonorsChoose does the rest. Working with approved vendors, they deliver the materials right to the teacher's door or, in



Frida DeSantiago, 12, chats with a classmate in Jahn Elementary School. The 7th-grader will attend a leadership conference in Washington thanks to DonorsChoose.org.

Frida's case, send the money directly to the conference hosts.

The donor receives a thank-you note from the teacher and, in many cases, notes and photos from the students.

Best said the site will go nationwide by the beginning of next school year.

The appeal of the Web site, donors say, is that it connects givers to a specific project, allowing them to target their donation and see exactly how their money was spent.

"People don't think about it as charitable giving, it's more like a shopping phenomenon, not just about writing a check," Best said. "People see it as shopping for classroom needs that speak to them. They see it as participatory, a form of volunteering rather than giving."

Finding ways to give

Sometimes, it's just raw emotion that attracts a donor. That's what happened with Amy Bernstein, an Oak Park lawyer, who

pledged the last \$150 needed to get Frida to Washington.

"I read what the teacher wrote, and it just broke my heart. It just touched me so deep," Bernstein said. "After I read it, I just thought to myself, 'There's no reason that little girl should not get to go.' I felt like I had to help her."

She has become a sort of compulsive donor on the Web site

since she happened upon it in November. So far, she has funded more than 60 projects to the tune of \$9,000. She has bought flash cards for 3rd graders, a Lego robot kit for junior high pupils and magazine subscriptions for an elementary school.

Most of her goodwill has been directed to Chicago schools, but Bernstein also donated money to help pay referees for a basketball team at an alternative high school in Los Angeles.

"I got my bonus last year, and I kind of went nuts on the DonorsChoose Web site," she joked. "My son says I'm obsessed, but I can't help myself. When I get on there and read what these kids need, I just can't help but donate. I'm a softy."

Nancy Fehrenbach is another softy. The Winnetka mother of four has donated money to buy history books for 5th graders, dry erase markers for a 3rd-grade classroom and play money and educational board games for 2nd graders.

"I live in Winnetka, and we are blessed with many things," Fehrenbach said. "I believe education is a great equalizer, and I wanted to give to children less fortunate than mine."

Fehrenbach still gives to the United Way, the Salvation Army and many other charities but finds DonorsChoose especially rewarding.

"There is a sense of greater satisfaction when you can see that you have actually helped with a concrete gift, giving

something that you know the children need and want," she said.

The popularity of the Chicago site has emboldened city teach-

'There are a lot of generous people out there who are willing to help, and I've figured out a way to tap into that.'

—Amy Liss, preschool teacher at Gladstone Elementary

ers. Amy Liss, a preschool teacher at Gladstone Elementary, has posted 41 projects on the Web site. So far, 31 of them have been funded, including sign-language materials and art supplies for her special education pupils.

"It's been a lifesaver for me and my kids," Liss said. "When you work in a Chicago public school, you don't get a lot of extras and sometimes you have to do without. But there are a lot of generous people out there who are willing to help, and I've figured out a way to tap into that."

Frida's mother, Silvia DeSantiago, said that without DonorsChoose her daughter would not be going to Washington.

"We're so happy for her, for all the things she's going to experience out there," she said.

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