

Posted on Fri, Dec. 15, 2006

Finding a way to connect with larger world

YOU KNOW how sometimes it's really hard to feel integrated with the larger world? How you want so much to make a meaningful contribution but the little things, like bagging up canned food for the local drive, don't seem to add up to much? Or how, when you're writing checks to charities, you get that little high looking at the pictures in the brochure but 20 minutes later, the high is gone and you wonder if there isn't a way to get more connection for your philanthropic investment?

I found a way.

At least, it's working for me. It's called Donors Choose and it's one of those brilliant applications of the Web that leave you wondering how we ever survived without it.

Teachers -- that underpaid, overtaxed lot to which we assign our most important work -- write up three or four paragraphs about something they need to make magic happen in their classroom, or even just give their students a fighting chance to learn anything. It's all there -- from basics like textbooks and staplers to elective supplies, like recorders and basketballs. And it's searchable by subject, by location, by grade.

I sorted first by Art & Music Projects, where I quickly stumbled upon Mrs. Dien, an elementary school teacher down in Los Angeles. She's leading a field trip to see Dan Zanes perform in April. Dan Zanes is a storyteller and musician and my girls love him, especially his "Polly Wolly Doodle" duet with Sheryl Crow. Now, no one could say a Dan Zanes show is something students need to succeed in life. But as I read the second paragraph, I learned that the entire student body is going, except the special needs kids. For them to go, the school would need to rent a bus with a lift, which costs \$382.53 a day, including gas, insurance and the driver's pay. So I picked up the tab. Come April 2007, those special needs kids will be humming alongside their luckier schoolmates.

The next week, I got this note:

Dear Kelly and Edward,

Thank you very much for funding the bus for our students to see Dan Zanes at UCLA Performing Arts Center. My special students have a difficult time learning academic subjects, but one area that they all enjoy and can relate to is music and storytelling. Thank you for making this possible. We will be sending our thank you letters and pictures of our trip after we attend the performance in April 2007.

Thank you,

Michelle Dien

It was better than finding the perfect sweater to go with the brown skirt I bought last year and never wear because, well, I don't have the perfect sweater to go with it.

High on the Michelle Dien letter, I went back to Donors Choose. This time, I found a high school in Chicago where 92 percent of the students are on free lunch. A geometry teacher there was asking for \$322.81 to buy a manipulatives kit that he is sure will help his students finally understand geometry. One click, and I had solved the problem.

It's a little problem, I know, and there's another problem right behind it. And sure, it's just one set of tools for one set of kids. But before I went too far in that direction, I got another letter:

Dear Kelly and Edward

My students and I cannot thank you enough for your generous donation to our classroom. When I informed my students of your generous gift, they were all incredibly ecstatic and astounded that someone from outside their community truly cared about their education. They were also very eager to start using the materials to help them learn geometry in new and innovative ways. Once again, thank you very much.

Regards,

Vinay Mullick

Paul Robeson High School

With \$322, I made some kids "ecstatic." I "astounded" them. I showed them that people they don't know care about what happens to them. And Vinay gave me his e-mail, so I can check in any time. Now that's the connection I was hoping for.

Donors Choose is online at www.donorschoose.org.

Reach Kelly Corrigan at kelly@circusofcancer.org. Kelly is online at www.kellycorrigan.com