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Today is Monday, February 12, 2007

Originally published Saturday, February 10, 2007

Updated Friday, February 09, 2007

Class acts

DonorsChoose.com matches charitable givers with classrooms to ensure teachers and students get the supplies they need.

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A few dozen boxes of multicolored modeling clay doesn't seem like much.

But what doesn't seem like much costs more than \$800 -- money that third-grade teacher Julie Denby didn't have.

"If we were to beg for the clay and we were to get it, the money would come away from other parts of education, like our after-school programs, " said Denby, a teacher at Barton Hill Elementary School in San Pedro. "It's a balance."

If she could get it, the clay would be used so her students could pound, roll and shape their own models of the Earth -- inner core, outer core, mantle and all -- with five colors to represent the planet's varying layers.

And though in the past she had emptied her own pockets to buy the sort of supplies her school administration couldn't cover -- small things including binders, pens, pencils -- Denby couldn't afford this.

So she asked for help.

Logging on to www.DonorsChoose.com, a Web site connecting classrooms in need with people who want to help them, Denby requested enough clay so that all 60 Barton Hill third-graders could build their very own planet Earths.

And within a few months, her request was funded by a single donor.

"We told the students, 'This is one person who donated all of this clay,' " said George Russell, another third-grade teacher at Barton Hill. "She's like our angel here. She doesn't know any of us, she doesn't know the kids, she probably doesn't know the school -- but she really changed a lot of lives in little ways. And she did it out of the goodness of her heart."

And that's something teachers can appreciate. With tax dollars paying for the basics but often leaving ancillary items by the wayside, many teachers use their own money to buy items for their classrooms.

In fact, according to a study by the National School Supply and Equipment Association, teachers nationwide spend an average of \$458 a year on school supplies.

"A lot of people don't realize how bad off some of these classrooms are," said Hylan Hubbard, a former fifth-grade teacher in Inglewood who now works as director of the Los Angeles division of DonorsChoose. "They're asking for books and pencils and pens."

A nonprofit organization formed in 2000 by Bronx public high school teacher Charles Best, the DonorsChoose formula is simple: Teachers needing classroom materials log on to the site, make a written request, and wait.

Interested donors can browse the site and fund -- either partially or entirely-- whichever project strikes their philanthropic fancy.

Unlike most charities, where donations are added to a single fund and used accordingly, DonorsChoose donors can decide exactly where their money goes.

And they'll get the pictures to prove it. DonorsChoose gives teachers a disposable camera and asks them to document the donations in action. In Denby's case, that meant taking 27 shots of her third-graders molding and designing their clay creations.

Donors who give more than \$100 also receive thank you notes from the students.

"I can write these beautiful thank you letters, but there is nothing like when you get these letters from the kids," said Hubbard, 39, who has a law degree from Tulane University and who previously worked for The National Urban League in New York City.

"Kids write these things and they mean it. And you know what they all say? They say, 'You don't even know me. You don't even know our class.' They get it."

Donors have the option of giving an additional 15 percent to fund the organization's administrative costs, but otherwise 100 percent of their donation goes directly to the project of their choice. (Administrative costs are funded primarily through private donations and sponsors.)

Since its inception, DonorsChoose has distributed more than \$10 million to classrooms in California, New York, North and South Carolina, Louisiana, Texas, Alabama, Mississippi and Chicago. According to Hubbard, the organization is expanding and will represent schools nationwide by the end of this year.

The Los Angeles division of DonorsChoose was formed a little more than a year ago, and already donors from 45 states have funded 1,060 proposals -- a total of \$546,942 worth of resources for more than 51,000 students.

"The uniqueness of DonorsChoose is that the citizen philanthropist, the regular person who doesn't have millions of dollars, gets treated like someone who gives millions of dollars," Hubbard said. "This is democratizing philanthropy."

There currently are 800 projects awaiting funding in the Los Angeles area. Project proposals range in price and complexity from a Downtown Los Angeles teacher hoping for a few ant farms for his fifth-grade classroom (\$115) to an Inglewood economics class needing two notebook computers (\$2,700).

Teachers are allowed to request anything for their classrooms as long as it enhances learning and is used directly by the students (a laptop computer for the teacher's personal use wouldn't qualify, for example).

Denby is one of three teachers at Barton Hill who have turned to DonorsChoose for help. Second-grade teacher Yuka Maseba requested yoga mats and Tara Caudle received 30 new dictionaries for her fourth-grade class.

They all agree it's hands-on activities that teach kids best. Just look at Denby's students.

It's been several months since they constructed their pocket planets and still, ask any of them to name the layers of the Earth and their hands will shoot up like rockets, voices chirping "I know! I know!"

"This is the inner core. This is the outer core. This is the mantle," rattled 8-year-old Joanna Huerta, her dark eyes beaming with confidence. In her tiny hands is her model of the planet, a blue and brown ball of clay sliced open to reveal the rainbow of layers within.

"My sister wanted me to destroy it and make something else but I told her, 'No. I like it. It looks pretty.'"

Huerta doesn't know the woman who bought all that clay for her classroom, all she knows is that "she paid a lot of money."

As for her teacher, a woman whose voice is as enthusiastic as those of the youngsters in her classroom -- and who gets teary-eyed when she tries to express her gratitude to the donor she knows only as "Mrs. Lynch" -- Denby is as grateful as anyone.

"There's a lot of money that goes into education that never sees the classroom," she said. "It is very heartwarming for teachers to know we have support out there."


On the Web

Go to www.donorschoose.org

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