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DECEMBER 2007

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souls of the earth

IN THE KIDS' CORNER

WHEN CHARLES BEST CREATED DONORSCHOOSE, HE GAVE TEACHERS A WAY TO UNDERWRITE ALL KINDS OF PROGRAMS FOR THEIR STUDENTS by katrine ames



Best stands in the colorful school garden that was created in memory of Andry Vega, a Brooklyn first-grader. A teacher planned it, the students planted it, and everyone uses it.

SECULAR SAINTS are hard to come by these days, but you can find some of them working miracles in a dingy loft in Manhattan, at the office of DonorsChoose.org. In 2000, Charles Best, a recent Yale graduate who was teaching at a Bronx high school, and his colleagues often talked about things they would do with their classes if only they had the money. That spurred Best to set up a nonprofit organization to fund projects that public school teachers envisioned but couldn't possibly afford. He started small, with 11 proposals from his friends. But in seven years, Best's DonorsChoose.org has raised more than \$13 million for such things as field

trips, lab equipment, bats and balls, seed germinators, musical instruments, and cooking gear, with every project fueled by a teacher's passion and imagination. Still, DonorsChoose has rankled some education administrators. As Best says: "Teachers go public with needs that would otherwise be papered over."

Like many inspired ideas, Best's works because it's simple and immediate. Teachers from across the country submit proposals to the DonorsChoose staff. If projects are approved, they're posted on the Web site donorschoose.org, where potential donors search for something that piques their interest. The feedback is like nothing else on earth. Teachers and students send thank-you letters and snapshots of the kids doing what the donor made possible. "Donors don't write hundred-dollar checks that go into a black hole," the amiable Best says. "The letters and photos were part of the idea from day one. I was trying to test out whether students would be grateful or just think it was more work." It isn't. For instance, after seventh-graders in a low-income city school received paperback copies of *Zlata's Diary*, by a girl enduring the Bosnian war, one student wrote, "I thought I had it tough until I read this book." Another said, "Thank you. Nobody ever cared about us before."

Nadine G. Reis, who teaches at a hard-pressed Brooklyn elementary school, has had 25 projects underwritten. Last December, six-year-old Andry Vega dashed across the street on his way from school and was killed. "He was such an upbeat kid," Reis says. She wrote a proposal for a memorial garden and soon had everything she needed, including dirt. "Every single kid in the school planted a flower," she says. "It was really a community project." Reis only recently met Best, by chance. "I tend to get a little cynical sometimes," she says, "but Charles makes you believe in mankind."