

Web site helps teachers find funds for projects

By **Kayla Gahagan**
 Journal staff

Meadowbrook Elementary School teacher Lila DeRaad's introduction to DonorsChoose.org was a good one.

The Rapid City teacher needed some printer ink cartridges for her kindergarten students' memory books, so she went to the donor Web site to post her request of \$100 for the cartridges.

Her request was filled within a week, and DeRaad was sent the ink cartridges and a package from DonorsChoose.org reminding her to send thank you cards to the donor. A disposable camera was also included so she could send back pictures of the kids benefiting from the donor's contribution.

DeRaad said she will definitely use the site again.

"The money is really going for what you want," she said.

DonorsChoose.org is a Web site that allows teachers to post project ideas that need funding, and donors to give money to the classroom of their choice. It recently expanded to include all teachers in the U.S. DeRaad is among several South Dakota teachers who are taking advantage of it.

Charles Best founded the site in 2000 while he was a teacher in the Bronx and saw firsthand the struggles teachers face to find resources to fund classroom projects.

"They'd have to dig into their own pockets," Neeta Nadkarny, associate director of DonorsChoose.org, said. "(Best) thought, 'What if we had an easy way to connect the needs of teachers with people who would want to

help ... and use the Internet as a platform to create a marketplace where any teachers can post a request?'"

The result has been a citizen philanthropy dream, with about 18.5 million donors from all 50 states contributing more than \$18 million to

See **Web site**, Page C6
 classrooms throughout the U.S. Best hopes \$100 million is donated someday.

Nadkarny said the best thing about the site is that anyone with access to a computer and the Internet can contribute directly to education. Donors can do a keyword search for a topic, grade or teacher and partially or completely fund it.

"The minimum is \$10, so anybody, from all walks of life, can have an impact of public education," she said. "You know where that money is going, and they can give directly to a specific need."

Nadkarny is hoping more South Dakota teachers will use the site. So far, 15 have posted requests, many of them being materials about Native American culture, and \$5,000 has been donated.

The site's popularity has soared because it offers the chance for people of all economic backgrounds to give, Best said.

"On a broader (scope), any teacher can be a change maker and any citizen a philanthropist," he said.

It's exactly what drew Chad Orzel, a blogger for ScienceBlogs

through Seedmagazine.com to DonorsChoose.org and eventually led him to do a blog fundraiser for the site in 2006.

"It was a really attractive charity from my perspective, because ... I liked the idea of funding specific teacher-initiated proposals as a way to improve schools," he said.

For people like Orzel and Sturgis resident Anne Zell, who also does philanthropy work, the Internet has become an efficient way to give.

"The Internet allows people to be philanthropists in ways that simply were not possible before the Internet was a part of daily life," Zell said.

Orzel agreed.

"It's a great tool for putting people together with charities that appeal to them," he said. "There are an astonishing number of charitable organizations out there covering pretty much any need. ... It can be pretty daunting. The Internet makes it easy to gather lots of information about different charities."

Zell said she will continue her philanthropic efforts on a local level because "there is something inherently satisfying about being able to see the results of your donation ... rather than simply sending your check off to a large organization. Even though you know the money is being put to good use, you never get to actually see the results."

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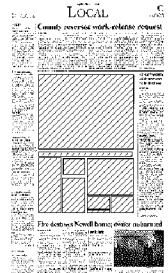
Online

Looking to give, but not sure where to start?

On the Net:
www.donorschoose.org
www.charitynavigator.org
www.philanthropy.com

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— Charles Best, DonorChoose.org, founder





Photos by Kristina Barker/Journal staff

Meadowbrook kindergarten teacher Lila DeRaad helps a student during a reading exercise Friday. DeRaad applied for a grant through Donorschoose.org, where she asked for a donation to be made to her classroom so that the cost of printing color pictures for

her 43 students' monthly memory book pages is paid for, rather than coming out of her pocket. Donors through the Web site are anonymous, and teachers are required only to send the donor a thank-you after a contribution has been made.



Meadowbrook kindergarten teacher Lila DeRaad helps students practice writing sentences.