

'JARED BOXES' BRING JOY TO ILL CHILDREN

Having a daughter who has endured numerous hospital stays, Dorseyville Middle School counselor Breane DeComo understands how stressful the experience can be for sick children and their families.

Through discussions with a couple of colleagues, Ms. DeComo came up with the idea to create "Jared Boxes" for several health care facilities in the area and enlisted students to help during their Exploratory Time. Jared Boxes are plastic, shoe-sized storage boxes filled with small gifts, toys, games, crayons, coloring books, and other fun activities that are given to children in the hospital to provide a diversion during what can be a scary time. Started by students at Our Lady of Victory Catholic School in State College, they are named in memory of 5-year-old Jared McMullen, a classmate who was diagnosed with an incurable brain stem tumor in 1999 and passed away a year later. According to The Jared Box Project, nearly 1 million boxes have been donated to 400 hospitals in the country since that time.

"Helping kids is near and dear to my heart," Ms. DeComo says of the DMS initiative. "Hospital stays are so hard on the kids and parents. The items in a Jared Box help get their mind off why they're there."

Ms. DeComo spearheaded the drive among students, staff members, acquaintances, and others, and students helped to pack the boxes. Along with toys, games, and inspirational notes for each recipient, the boxes contained tic-tac-toe boards made in DMS' makerspace.

Charlotte McKibben, a DMS sixth-grader, designed the boards and oversaw their production, along with school librarian David Snyder.



Charlotte says she took an interest in the project by following the example of her parents, who both have a background in health care.

"I know that when I'm older, I want to do something for sick kids," Charlotte says. "I put a lot of love into those tic-tac-toe boards."

Each tic-tac-toe board contains the quote, "Look into the future, not the past." Charlotte says that's a sentiment that she tries to keep in mind, and she hopes to inspire pediatric patients to do the same.

"I hope that they can be happy and live by that saying, too."

Thanks to the generosity of the DMS community and beyond, 127 Jared Boxes were delivered to three local facilities: AHN Harnar, ACMH Hospital in Kittanning, and the Children's Home of Pittsburgh.

Ms. DeComo hopes that for the students, the project reinforced lessons that they'll continue to practice.

"Giving back and helping others in need is so important," she says. "For those who have never had a hospital stay, I hope it opened their eyes to that reality and what a difference they can make."

