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Secret Snowflake - Kids Giving to Kids

By Lee Borrowman



JM's Leadership students wrap hundreds of gifts.
Photo Jerry Gruen

marched through JM's doors.

Seventh grader Patrick Hayes heard the call. "I wanted to go to Cambridge and help the kids - coming up short (of gifts) would have really sucked for them and for me," he explains. Hayes and his mom, Connie, discussed ways he might be able to raise money to buy toys. Armed with a pledge of matching funds from Connie, Hayes sold his GameCube and old games, and some friends' old games, at GameStop - he added in \$100 from his own savings and headed to Toys R Us. "I think we probably bought 50 toys!" he happily reports. "It really feels right, because I haven't donated to charity that much," reflects Hayes, who is planning an even greater effort next year.

Other families responded in kind. More kids donated toys; kids who had already brought in toys showed up with yet more toys. "One mom brought in between 75 and 100 gifts herself," says Lorie, "and many others donated hundreds of dollars to fund the gap." JM's front office staff fielded calls from parents on the last donation day, some of whom were calling from stores, asking what types of toys were still needed.

Finally, a happier message went out: "Thank you for helping us meet our 2010 Secret Snowflake goal!"

The Secret Snowflake program began nine years ago when Lorie's wife, Amanda, who taught at Rheem Elementary before the couple's first child was born, was doing her student teaching at Cambridge. "The first year we aimed to buy gifts for the kids in her class and we ended up with enough gifts for the entire 1st grade. By the fourth year we had covered the whole school," recalls Lorie.

In addition to giving kids a chance to help other kids who are less fortunate, Secret Snowflake is a lesson in teamwork. "The program wouldn't function without Jerry Gruen," Lorie states. "He runs the Leadership class - his Leadership kids are invaluable."

Gruen explains, "The Leadership class spends the three weeks before the break working on the Snowflake project and is responsible for processing the gifts once they get to JM. Basically, we sort, wrap, and bag the gifts for each class. We keep a running total of what we have received and what we still need; this we communicate to the school and community. Because we deliver 800+ gifts; it is a really big job."

"When it comes down to it, it's the families in the community that make this program such a success," Lorie concludes. "We could be the most organized wrappers or best cheerleaders in the world, but if the families don't support the program with their donations, we wouldn't be having this discussion. Every year I am amazed by the community's support."

And every year, the kids at Cambridge Elementary get at least one new toy for Christmas.

Christmas came a few days early for students at Concord's Cambridge Elementary School, courtesy of Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School's Secret Snowflake program. At least 700 new toys were donated this year by the Moraga school's students, families and friends - the gifts were wrapped and brought to Cambridge last Friday as students gleefully headed into the long winter break.

Two days before the donation deadline, however, it looked as if there would not be enough toys for all of the Cambridge students, the vast majority of whom come from low-income families.

Joaquin Moraga (JM) math teacher Brett Lorie, who has spearheaded the Secret Snowflake program for nine years with fellow teacher Jerry Gruen, says they usually collect about 750 toys each December. But in this economically challenging year, "It took us longer to hit our goal; it seems as if fewer kids brought in gifts, but those that did brought in more gifts on average."

A desperate plea went out two days before the donation deadline, spreading virally at the hands of supportive JM teachers and staff. Only 300 toys had been donated; the youngest Cambridge students would receive gifts, but the older ones might not unless more toys



JM students brought gifts to Cambridge Elementary on Dec. 17. Photo Amanda Lorie

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