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Students help teacher give Paradise hope

By Vera Kochan



Rheem Elementary School teacher Angie Guidi is shocked by outpouring of support. Photos Vera Kochan

Angie Guidi, a second grade teacher at Donald L. Rheem Elementary School in Moraga, knows firsthand the devastation of the Paradise, California fires. She grew up there, and several of her family members lost their homes. Even though her aunt, uncle and cousins' houses and possessions are gone, her parents' home was spared. Guidi said, "Some businesses have survived. A building here and there, but Paradise is resilient and that's enough to give them the spirit to rebuild."

That type of determination gave Guidi's students and their families the idea that they could help in the process. Spearheading the recovery endeavor was Kimberley Anderson, organizer and mom to one of Guidi's students.

Anderson spread the word for parents to buy gift cards to various stores and donate them to Paradise. Quickly gift cards from grocery stores, big box stores, clothing stores and even pet stores came pouring in. The gift cards would allow the Paradise fire victims the opportunity to make their own purchases for whatever they needed most.

The surprise presentation was to have taken place in Guidi's classroom, but schools were closed due to unsafe air quality. Instead, the Rheem Starbuck's played host on a smoky Nov. 16 morning.

The gift cards, representing blooms, were artfully arranged around two large plants - a Spider Plant and Peace Lily - which according to Anderson (and NASA) are nature's air filters. Several of Guidi's students, their parents and Rheem Principal Brian Sullivan were on hand for the surprise. Sullivan said, "Ms. Guidi has been a special part of the Rheem community for over 10 years. I'm glad that we can provide her with a little bit of support in these very trying times."

Before Guidi's arrival, she was told that the kids wanted to help her hometown, but she had no idea what was planned. When presented with the "bouquets," she was visibly moved to tears. As late arriving students approached with handfuls of more gift cards and handmade tokens of affection, the spirit behind the gesture was intensified.

Amid the hugs and expressions of support, Guidi stated, "I have a small car and was wondering how I could fit things in it to donate to Paradise. These cards solved the problem!"

Guidi explained why she loves Moraga so much. "It reminds me of home. Paradise and Moraga have the same type of people. Neighbors supporting neighbors."

Donations of gift cards are still being accepted by anyone wishing to participate in the Paradise recovery efforts. Simply stop by the Donald L. Rheem Elementary School's administration office and let them know you're donating for Guidi's Paradise cause.

For information call (925) 376-4441.



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