

New Bedford Public School's 'Christmas is for Kids' project grows larger each year

New Bedford Public Schools staff, volunteers and donors help students have a holiday that is merry and bright.

Like the dream scene in the Nutcracker when the enchanted tree grows larger and larger, Paula Benedetti dreams of growing Christmas is for Kids – an annual project at New Bedford Public Schools that aims to ensure NBPS families have gifts for their children to open this holiday season – whether it is Christmas, Hanukkah, or Kwanzaa. A retired NBPS Dropout Prevention Specialist, Paula saw a need during the holidays among her students and decided to address it head-on by enlisting the help of school colleagues and friends. She started “Christmas is for Kids” with her husband more than twenty years ago.

Every year the project grows, involving more people and more schools. Paula notes, “We have been able to secure a volunteer this year in seven of our schools to assist in identifying families, accepting and storing gifts, and arranging for delivery to students’ homes. My dream is to see the project in every elementary school so that we can identify and respond to all children in need during the holidays.”

Superintendent Thomas Anderson stated, “Ms. Benedetti’s devotion to this project and the commitment of so many NBPS staff, volunteers and donors is a compelling example of the dedication of our school community to the wellbeing and happiness of our children. I commend their responsiveness in addressing this need; it demonstrates proactive empathy and

love – a culture of care.”

Additionally, the Superintendent’s Office collected \$645 in gifts cards, as well as, toys, hats, gloves, socks and toiletries. Marjorie Fernandes, Senior Executive Assistant to the Superintendent noted, “We were able to support six families, with the remaining items going to supply the district’s McKinney-Vento students.”

Social media has assisted in attracting new NBPS volunteers and donors across the district. Wraparound coordinators, staff, nurses, SACs, guidance and principals identify families from each school involved. Paula explains, “Families are contacted and informed that they have won the school lottery for getting some assistance at the holidays and every child in the household under the age of 18 will receive gifts,” adding, “we work with a school’s list of families and then reach out to donors. Donors know only the first name of the child, their clothing size, toy wish or a favorite item. Donors purchase items and deliver them to the school. A coordinator at the school prepares boxes with family names for delivery. We have great coordinators, such as Nancy Antil at DeValles School and Carrie Lyonnois at Congdon School, who have assisted in making Christmas is for Kids a wonderful success at their schools.”

This year, 382 children will receive presents who otherwise may not have had any gifts to open.

At Campbell School, the team involved several staff, including Kate Donly, Janice Spooner and Principal Lisa Wheelden. Tasks included soliciting donors, gift check-ins, giftwrapping, box assembly and deliveries. Campbell’s efforts will benefit 31 families and 81 children this year.

At Congdon School, Yaitza Mojica-Rodriguez “did it all,” said Principal Darcie Aungst. “Yaitza identified a list of 25 families and 55 children along with their clothing sizes.”

At DeValles School, Kevin Gifford, Nicola Ansdell, and Jarred

Varao coordinated all the gifts, including deliveries to out-of-town homeless shelters, where some DeValles families have been displaced. Kevin delivered several truckloads of gifts for both Congdon and DeValles throughout New Bedford and Fall River.

At Keith Middle School, Nurse Kelly Melo and Yallisa Portelain identified 8 families and 24 children, coordinating to locate donors. In addition, Nurse Melo reported that two families and seven children were severely impacted by house fires this year, but that the community responded with great generosity. Paula noted, "We quadrupled the donors for them so they got four times the items plus bicycles, food cards, Walmart gift cards, baskets of supplies for the kitchen, bathroom, toiletries and school supplies." Jennifer Oliveira at Keith wrapped all the extra toy gifts collected this year.

A Keith Middle School parent expressed deep appreciation for the assistance. "My boys and I will never forget this generosity. What a relief this is for me as a Dad," he said through tears of joy.

At Normandin Middle School, Health Representative Krystle Empey oversaw the project this year that assisted 11 families and 38 children, working with Paula to find additional donors, many of which were among the staff.

At Pacheco School, teacher Kendra Galary has been an enthusiastic force in the growth of Christmas is for Kids. This year, 120 children at Pacheco School will benefit. Working with Paula and Principal Justine Medina, Kendra reached out to additional donors to provide gifts for children at Pacheco School.

At the Paul Rodrigues Administration Building, Alice Johnson, Jennifer Ferland, Sandi Ford and Andrew O'Leary assisted with multiple aspects of the project, such as wrapping stations, providing secure storage areas and deliveries.

At Rodman School, Principal Kim Marshall identified two families and nine children to receive gifts.

At Taylor School, Colleen Maloney and Principal Rafaela Defigueiredo identified one family and two children to receive gifts, with more participation and volunteers sought for next year.

For more details on volunteering with NBPS Christmas is for Kids in the future, email Paula Benedetti: pbenedetti@newbedfordschools.org.

PHOTO: