

# Students learn gratitude as they give to needy kids

## Club project provides elementary school pupils with supplies

08:01 PM CDT on Wednesday, July 27, 2005

By KARIN SHAW ANDERSON / The Dallas Morning News

The Christmas wish list was so modest that it could have been filled with one trip down the school supply aisle at a discount store.

But in the hands of Judith Castaneda and her service project partner, the list became a chance to shower a migrant Mexican girl who lacked the means to buy ordinary No. 2 pencils with an assortment of pencils, coloring books and a candy-filled pen decorated with Disney princesses.

“We were so sad, because we thought maybe she’d want a Barbie or something,” Judith remembered thinking after looking over the brief wish list. “We tried not to make it just a Mead black spiral.”

Last fall, for their annual service project, the John Horn High School Spanish club members had adopted a bilingual class of second- and third-graders at L.L. Hotchkiss Elementary School in Dallas to present with Christmas gifts.

“All my kids are recent immigrants,” said Christi Castillo, a Hotchkiss teacher. “They don’t really have a lot of nice things.”

Ms. Castillo buys most of her students’ supplies.

“A lot of their families are broken. So they’re here with their mom, and then their older siblings are still in Mexico,” she said. “For them, it was such a great experience to have the high school kids come in. ... It’s like a role model for them. And to be able to see good citizenship — it was just a great experience for them.”

Belinda Briones, a Horn Spanish teacher and co-sponsor of the club, read through the handwritten wish lists and told her students about the backgrounds of the children they would be buying gifts for.

“They were just so touched and felt so bad that they didn’t have more,” Ms. Briones said.

“These kids have so much at this high school,” she said. The youngsters “would ask for three things, but my kids would put together backpacks full of things. It wouldn’t just be a backpack. It would be notebook paper and a coloring book and markers or just things that they had when they were little and they know that Ms. Castillo’s kids don’t have at home.”

The club members worked in pairs to buy the gifts.

Judith and Kristina Trevino wanted to make their gifts memorable, so they included a pink princess sweater to match the Disney-themed gifts for the girl they adopted.

The high school students’ generosity was rewarded last week with free tickets to a Texas Rangers baseball game and recognition during the game.

“I was in Starbucks one day, and I saw something called ‘Good Seats for Good Deeds,’ “ sponsored by Starbucks and the Texas Rangers, Ms. Briones said. She filled out a form telling of the club service project and provided a picture from the Christmas party the club members attended with Ms. Castillo’s students.

“They called me and said, ‘This is awesome — teenagers getting involved and wanting to do things for others in the community,’ “ Ms. Briones said.

Club members said that although they appreciated the recognition, the response from Ms. Castillo’s students was reward enough.

“Even though it’s a lot of work, it’s worth it, seeing the expression on the kids’ faces,” said club member Joyce John.

Monica De Luna, another member and volunteer, agreed.

“It’s priceless,” she said. “Once you meet the kids ... you just look at things differently. You really take a look around and step back and see how everything is. You learn to appreciate things, and you kind of discover yourself through what other people have been through.”

That’s what club member Justin Spain discovered.

“I come from a family where, pretty much, if I say I want something, I get it, because I was spoiled,” he said. “And then I come out there and I see all these little kids, and they don’t have everything that I’ve had.

“It just tears you up when you see something like that.”

Before Ms. Briones applied for the baseball game tickets, the students had decided to go back to Hotchkiss in the spring and present books the club members illustrated and wrote in English and Spanish.

“Her kids are trying to learn English, and my kids are trying to learn Spanish, so it was the perfect combination of both goals,” Ms. Briones said. “My kids just fell in love with her students.”

While accepting the books, Ms. Castillo’s students brought out the gifts they had received at Christmas to show how they had been used.

“They talked about it for months afterwards. It was so exciting for them,” Ms. Castillo said.

“They took so good care of the stuff,” she told the club members last week. “They took care of everything you guys gave them.”

Next year, the club members hope to return with gifts for Ms. Castillo’s students, but they also hope to spread their generosity to other classrooms. Ms. Briones is leaving Horn to teach bilingual students at Lee A. McShan Jr. Elementary School in Dallas, and club co-sponsor Catherine Carreras will teach bilingual students at Lakewood Elementary in Dallas. Ms. Briones taught bilingual youngsters before moving to Horn a few years ago.

Both women said visits to Ms. Castillo’s classroom inspired their moves.

“I love these kids, and I love this school,” Ms. Briones said of Horn. “But after working on these service projects, I really miss being around the little kids and just servicing the really low-income kids. ... I just had to go back.”

E-mail [ksanderson@dallasnews.com](mailto:ksanderson@dallasnews.com)

or call 469-330-5649