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Photo of Winslow Townson at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough by Elise Amendola. Action photos on the cover by Townson are, from left, 2014 World Cup in Brazil, Bruins hockey and 2011 Sports Illustrated cover of Red Sox's Dustin Pedroia.

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Leah Okimoto and her husband, Dan Schneider, a teacher at Phillips Academy Andover, pose with their daughter, Alison Schneider, 6, on the grounds of the school. The Andover family has started Aaron’s Presents, a nonprofit grant organization benefiting children to honor the short, but meaningful, life of their infant son.
A GIFT DELIVERED IN JUST 8½ DAYS
AARON’S PRESENTS INSPIRES LEGACY OF YOUTHFUL ACTS OF KINDNESS

During his 8 ½ days of life, Aaron Makaio Schneider silently touched family and friends, nurses and doctors, and many others who became familiar with his tragic story in the neonatal intensive-care units at two Boston hospitals.

Born in June 2013 at just 25 ½ weeks, Aaron was gone before uttering a word, his family says, yet he demonstrated a special strength and spirit, plus an ability to elicit love and compassion — all while reminding them of the fragility of human life.

Even as she mourned, Leah Okimoto instantly knew she wanted to create a positive legacy for her son. But she initially wasn’t sure how.

She and her husband, Dan Schneider, discussed starting a scholarship in Aaron’s name. But Okimoto wanted to create something that had a broader impact. Her hope was to use Aaron’s memory to guide multiple children in fulfilling their goals and dreams.

She began thinking about the ripple effect of positive energy — how one small, kind gesture can brighten a person’s day, and hopefully inspire them to do the same for someone else.

“When I was imagining what to do with a relatively small pool of money, I thought, what if we gave out mini-grants to young kids to do, just, anything positive? Anything that would help somebody else,” she says. “What if we had this collection, or gallery, of all these small acts?”

That’s how Aaron’s Presents was born. At its core, it aims to help children realize that they have something valuable to give to the world at every age and stage of life, and that giving of themselves for the benefit of others brings happiness, healing and purpose.

Okimoto’s Andover-based, nonprofit organization is directed at children in eighth grade and younger, awarding them mini-grants of up to $500 in services, materials and whatever else it takes to bring their ideas to fruition.

The initiative was established late last year and Okimoto treated the first round of applications as a pilot program, working with 26 children to carry out 12 grant-funded projects.

The first students who applied live in North Andover, Lawrence, Danvers

By Lauren DiTullio
and Lowell. Some submitted projects by themselves, while others formed groups with their peers.

Okimoto and her team review applications on a rolling basis, and once approved, she encourages participants to complete their project within three months of receiving their grant.

Word of the program has spread as Okimoto has worked with local educators to spread awareness of Aaron’s Presents and get it off the ground, although some people are still stumbling on the organization by chance.

She is especially seeking to develop interest in her own backyard. She and her husband live with their 6-year-old daughter, Alison, on the campus of Phillips Academy in Andover, where she teaches math and coaches cross-country.

“My goal is really to get kids involved from all different kinds of communities. All demographics, all socioeconomic backgrounds,” she says. “I really like this idea of teaching kids, or showing them, that we all have something to give.”

Okimoto, a musical theater composer by profession, is well versed in the dynamics of children, having worked with youngsters in the classroom and other settings. She has taught music classes, run arts and crafts programs and volunteered at her daughter’s charter school in Lowell.

Through those experiences, she says she has sought to nurture the generosity, creativity and enthusiasm of young children that sometimes goes untapped.

Okimoto says she elected to start Aaron’s Presents as her own organization rather than volunteering with an existing program because she couldn’t find one that allows children to take control of their own ideas without having to filter them through an adult.

“I knew not to give them too many ideas or examples or anything,” she says. “I just wanted to see what they would come up with because they’re so creative themselves.”

That concept extends to the grant application process. Okimoto says allowing interested children to submit a proposal on their own not only lets them learn skills, it changes their perspective on the worth of their accomplishments.

She feels children traditionally are
acustomed to thinking about what they will be given in return for their efforts. Whether it’s a good grade, a diploma or an eventual degree, they’re trained to ask, “After I do all these things, or hit all these milestones, what is the world going to give me?”

“What I want the kids to start thinking of is, ‘Now that I have these skills, what can I give?’” she says.

To that end, Okimoto offers two types of grants.

A “Reach Out” grant funds any project that better the life of at least one person. A 7-year-old Andover student currently has an application in the works to act as a “book doctor” at her school’s library, repairing broken spines and torn pages.

Owen Burke, a sixth-grader at St. Augustine School in Andover, received one of last year’s grants to provide chess sets to the Youth Development Organization in Lawrence, which was an integral part of the pilot year for Aaron’s Presents.

The other option, a “Tap In” grant, allows youths to hone a skill that they may then share with others.

Channel Hernandez, an eighth-grader at Guilmette Middle School in Lawrence, used grant funds to pay for months of voice lessons in preparation for leading a glee club of younger YDO participants. It is set to launch in the coming weeks.

“I’m really excited to start it. I’m also nervous. I’m scared the kids might be nervous, too,” Hernandez says.

Hernandez has a shining example to follow in her younger sister and three friends who have already presented a gymnastics class for Youth Development children with the backing of Aaron’s Presents. Valeria Hernandez worked with Charlyna Lopez, Kelina Rosado and Jasmine Delacruz to teach elementary-school students to tumble, move rhythmically and

Aaron’s Presents founder Leah Okimoto, right, looks at the project by Luis Benitez Jr. during a party for the organization’s first-year grant recipients. Benitez received $137 to create a rubber band jewelry-making business and generously gave several special items away to people who had helped him in life and school.

$267.48 bought pencil cases, colored pencils, drawing pencils, pads and black frames for a Danvers third-grader and his friends to make art that will hang in Boston Children’s Hospital.

$137.33 bought a loom, bands, charms, other jewelry supplies and business cards to help a Lowell sixth-grader achieve his goal of selling handmade bracelets and design bands for those who have impacted his life positively.

$188.51 bought a floor parachute, name tags, craft supplies and flowers to help three Lowell sixth-graders and their classmates coordinate activities for the elderly at a local nursing home.
"I think there is great value in empowering all children to develop and apply a specific skill set and, possibly, create something right in front of us."

**Beth Delforge, Visual and Performing Arts Coordinator for Andover Public Schools**

be lifted into the air with the aid of their instructors.

The girls from the Youth Development Organization say they acquired a number of valuable skills from the project. They were surprised by how comfortable they were collaborating with one another, and they learned to plan and budget in a way they hadn’t had to in the classroom.

They also say they gained self-confidence by commanding the attention of a room full of younger students, and felt reassured by the trust they received from the children’s parents. Perhaps as important, they developed an appreciation for the challenges people face in getting a project off the ground, Okimoto adds.

“We used to look at Howard (Sticklor, founder of YDO Lawrence) and think it was easy,” Delacruz says. “Now we know that getting the space, finding kids who are interested, making a schedule, it’s harder than we thought.”

This past June, the 26 first-year recipients of Aaron’s Presents grants came together for a celebration in Lowell, where they demonstrated their projects through performances and presentations. With one successful year of projects under her belt, Okimoto says the next step before her is expansion. She recently brought on a part-time regional director, Kim Labonte-Kay, the mother of Danvers grant recipient Bryce Kay, whose artwork will soon hang on the walls of Boston Children’s Hospital.

In September, Okimoto and Kay traveled to public middle and elementary schools in Andover, introducing students to Aaron’s Presents and dropping application forms in each office.

Standing in front of several dozen students in the West Middle School auditorium in Andover, Okimoto explained the double meaning behind Aaron’s Presents.

With each grant she awards, she hopes to enable a child to give a gift, or “present,” that, in turn, allows Aaron’s “presence” to continue to be felt.

“I wanted to make sure that out of his life came not just heartache and sadness, but something positive,” she tells the students. “To me, you guys are some of the most kind, creative, thoughtful people on the planet, and we should be entrusting more resources into your hands.”

Beth Delforge, the visual and performing arts coordinator for Andover Public Schools, says she is especially drawn to the hands-on component of Aaron’s Presents and has been thrilled to see the interest it is generating among local youths.

Andover students left a recent assembly led by Okimoto bouncing ideas for projects off each other, Delforge says.

“I think there is great value in empowering all children to develop and apply a specific skill set and, possibly, create something right in front of us,” Delforge says.