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Raising Compassionate Children

Aaron's Presents: Teaching Kids to Give Brings Happiness, Healing and Purpose



by Leah Okimoto

As a parent, I want many things for my 6-year-old daughter. But one of my biggest hopes for her is that she will grow up to be the type of person who brings chicken soup to a friend who is down with a cold. Her ability to truly care about and actively give to others, and to form real relationships and connections with people, is key to living a life of meaning and fulfillment, which is ultimately my dream for her.

Like all parents, I want her to be "happy," but to know that, ironically, true happiness does not come from

focusing on ways to make one self happy, but from focusing on ways to increase the happiness of other people in the world.

Over the past year, I have personally learned the power of giving to bring happiness, healing and purpose. In June 2013, I gave birth to my son, Aaron, prematurely. And although he gave it his best fight, he only lived 8 ½ days.

They say that when you lose a baby, you lose your future. There is no past, no shared experiences to reminisce about with other people. This definitely rang true for me, because I had planned on staying home with him. There was no Plan B – this was simply not supposed to happen. We hadn't put his room together yet, and

he never came home, so for a long time it felt like a terrible dream. But I knew I had to completely re-envision my future, and help my husband and then 5-year-old daughter to re-envision theirs.

My husband was the first to suggest starting a scholarship fund or something else in Aaron's memory. A few nights later, an idea literally popped into my head and I thought: *What if we raised some money and gave out mini-grants to young kids to do cool, positive projects?* Then we could have this collection of small, creative, thoughtful acts that were done by other children *because of his short but meaningful life.* I called it *Aaron's Presents*, because I liked thinking of each of those projects as his little "presents" to the world. I also felt

that if I could sense the other kind of "presence," his presence all around me everyday, maybe I wouldn't feel so lost.

I started creating *Aaron's Presents* in September 2013. My daughter was in school full-day for the first time, and I dove into learning how to build a website and start a non-profit organization. To the outside world, I seemed to be functioning okay. But in reality, I was a mess. There's really no other way to put it. I walked around in a fog with all of these heavy thoughts in my head. I got annoyed when I heard people complaining about the traffic or the weather. I was angry that I was spending my days and nights working on a computer instead of playing with my son. I dreaded going out, because on the one hand, I could literally feel people I knew



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walking the other way to avoid running into me, and on the other hand, I felt like a human magnet for really awkward, uncomfortable conversations.

But while all of this was going on, something else was happening to me. As I developed the program and started introducing it to kids, and then working with them on their projects, I started to feel...happy. There were days when I would meet with them and skip back to my car with a big smile on my face and this sense of purpose and inspiration. And in those moments, which became more and more frequent, I felt Aaron's presence more than his absence.

As I thought about this shift in my attitude and outlook, I realized that these kids had given me a huge gift. They had allowed me to give of myself – and by that, I mean drawing from the different parts of me that make me who I am, including my personality, my interests, my love of kids, my love of projects, the people I know, my background and life experiences – to help bring their awesome ideas to life.

That type of giving, I learned, brings happiness, healing and purpose.

And that is one of the most important life tools I hope to impart to my daughter. I want her to strive, work hard, pursue her passions and interests, make the most of her educational opportunities, achieve her dreams and become the person she is meant to be. But at every step along the way, I want her to see her life in terms of what she can give, rather

than what she can receive. And when things are going well for her, but especially when she is hurting, I hope she will tap into whoever she is at that moment and reach out to others with something positive to give.

I believe that if our kids are giving to the world around them in some positive way, they will never have to wonder if their lives matter or have a purpose. They will not need to bully others to make themselves feel more powerful. They will not need to try to escape from their realities by any means possible. And the younger they are when they see themselves in this light, the better!

If you have, know or work with a child who might be interested in applying for an Aaron's Presents grant of up to \$500 in materials and services, please visit our website at www.aaronspresents.org to learn more and download an application. Feel free to contact us with any questions at all at hello@aaronspresents.org. Our first 26 kids completed our first 12 projects this past spring, directly giving something positive to over 1,000 people, and we are so excited to meet even more kids this year and to help them carry out their very own creative, thoughtful ideas!

Leah Okimoto is a North Shore mother who lives in Andover with her husband and 6 year old daughter. Her son, Aaron, lives on in her heart and through her work with the amazing Aaron's Presents grant recipients who bring her and others joy and inspiration every day.



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