

Presents with Purpose; Charity fosters acts of kindness, goodwill among young people

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Leah Okimoto is honoring her son's short life by helping young students help others.

The Andover mother has turned the grief surrounding the loss of her son two years ago into a youth empowerment program aptly named Aaron's Presents.

Aaron's life ended just eight days after his premature birth in June 2013. His legacy, however, lives on in the charity he inspired that awards area children up to \$500 to support their creative ideas for thoughtful acts in their communities.

"Like a surprise for an ill grandmother or something," Okimoto said. "Anything that would help them think outside of themselves. We thought that funding many small, good acts would be a nice way to remember Aaron."

In its first year, the nonprofit Aaron's Presents raised \$38,000 to fund projects costing an average of just \$250 to carry out. The initiative is supported by donations from private citizens and businesses, including Andover's Orange Leaf Frozen Yogurt and Salvatore's Restaurant, both of which recently selected the charity as one of the efforts to support as part of its community fundraising campaigns.

Aaron's Projects is currently funding more than 30 active projects, one-third of which are based in Andover. With several success stories already to report, Okimoto expects another 80 projects to be completed this year.

Costume Fairy

Holly Smith, a third-grader at Sanborn Elementary School in Andover, learned over Halloween last year "that one good deed could change the world."

With funding from Aaron's Presents, Holly assembled personalized packages with cards and Halloween costumes for each of the 21 children at a women's shelter in Lawrence.



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COURTESY PHOTO Holly Smith, bottom row center, is thanked by some of the employees at the Lawrence shelter where she provided Halloween costumes for the children last year, including, top row, from left, Dianne McAuliffe, Angelica Pascual and Jeanette Ortega as well as Aaron's Presents founder Leah Okimoto. Holly is flanked by her brother, Michael, and Okimoto's daughter, Allison.

Mother Linda Smith said her daughter was motivated to help after picking out a costume of her own last year. When she explained to Holly that some children aren't fortunate enough to be able to afford a costume, the local third-grader realized how terrible that must be, her mother said.

Holly and her mother spent several hours purchasing the costumes, which they personally delivered to the shelter. They were told by the staff how excited the children were about Holly's goodwill gesture.

"(The director) said that at their Halloween party a year before, only three kids showed up in costumes," Linda Smith said. "I think that made Holly feel really good, knowing that she really made a difference."

'Papa's Painters'

Michelle Rota remembers being at the dinner table when her 12-year-old daughter, Kaylee, shared her dream with her parents.

"She asked if she could put together a painting class for people with Parkinson's disease in honor of my father-in-law, who passed away last January," Michelle Rota said. "I started crying my eyes out."

The Dorothy Middle School student hopes to make good on her goal in the coming months through the launch of a class she's calling "Papa's Painters." A grant from Aaron's Presents is helping to make the class a reality.

"(My grandfather) was an incredible car designer," Kaylee said in her mission statement. "He would draw out designs, and would constantly have to use his hands to work with the cars and all the materials he had to use."

Then, Parkinson's interfered with her grandfather's abilities.

"I was sad for him," she said. "I know this was his life's work and I saw how he hated the disease for taking away his ability to create what his mind wanted, but his hands couldn't produce."

Kaylee believes that with the right materials, people suffering from Parkinson's disease should still be able to create artwork. She has been researching materials like specially built paintbrushes, sturdier easels and 3-D printers that could help people continue to create despite the loss of some of their fine motor skills. She has sought the advice of the people at The Maker Mill in North Andover, an organization that encourages creativity in children by supplying them with the latest technological tools.

"I hope to give people with Parkinson's the confidence in themselves, so they're not thinking that this disease is ruining their lives," she said. "I'd like them to feel like they have control and creative ability."

Kaylee hopes to have a class up and running this spring. Her fellow members of Girl Scout Troop 62101 have already said they'd love to help out.

"She's just so passionate about it," her mother said.

Giving dreams life

Okimoto's role through Aaron's Presents is simply to help young people achieve their goals by buying the items needed for them to bring their projects to fruition. No money is exchanged with the children, though what they receive is likely of greater value, she said.

She ultimately hopes to instill a sense of initiative and confidence in grant recipients by allowing them to carry out projects the way they imagine, without the guilt or pressure that can sometimes be placed on them by adults.

"When I work with kids, I try to inspire them to think of other people and their role in the world and how they can contribute," Okimoto said. "If kids can see themselves as having something to give to the world around them, that would give their lives meaning and purpose because they know they can make the world better."

Aaron's Presents is looking to connect with local businesses interested in sponsoring its projects or providing materials or services. For more information on how to donate or to learn more about the charity and its grants program, visit www.aaronspresents.org.

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