

Donors Filling Teachers' Wish Lists

Website Allows Direct Giving To Meet Classroom Needs

By ARIELLE LEVIN BECKER | Courant Staff Writer

December 24, 2007

Michelle Lewis' Christmas list includes a set of LeapFrog books for her first-grade pupils to use — or at least the \$424 needed to get a shipment of them to her Hartford classroom.

Gary Petersen, a Wethersfield teacher, is eagerly awaiting a package of globes for his fourth-graders. After that, he would like a supply of Post-it notes his pupils can use to leave "tracks" of their thinking as they read books.

For teachers such as Lewis and Petersen, wish lists that might once have been out of reach — or come out of pocket — are now up for fulfillment from just about anyone who wants to give. Their proposals for classroom materials are among 536 requests Connecticut teachers have made since September through the website DonorsChoose.org, run by a nonprofit aimed at matching teachers with donors.

"It was kind of like winning the lottery," said Petersen, whose proposal for 10 globes his students can write on, a \$788 request, was recently funded by a handful of online donors.

DonorsChoose began in New York City seven years ago and expanded to teachers nationwide in September. Founder Charles Best taught high school in the Bronx and wanted to match teachers with ideas for projects they couldn't fund with donors who wanted to help schools but were leery of giving money without knowing what their dollars would achieve.

Proposals for materials can be submitted through the website by public school teachers, librarians, guidance counselors, coaches or other school employees who work full time and spend at least 75 percent of it with students. Donors — or "citizen philanthropists" in DonorsChoose lingo — can search for projects through the website, which is designed as an amazon.com-like shopping site.

The proposals range from the basic — copy paper or crayons — to larger items — digital projectors or moviemaking software. Potential donors can search for certain types of projects, areas, or high-poverty schools, and then choose to fund all or part of a project.

Once a project is fully funded, DonorsChoose buys the materials and ships it to the teacher, along with a disposable camera for the teacher to document the gifts in use.

As of Sunday evening, 357 projects in Connecticut had been funded since the site was

opened to teachers in the state, and \$121,498 had been raised from 538 donors in 38 states. Nearly all the funded projects are in high-poverty districts.

Another 171 Connecticut projects are still awaiting funding, including Lewis' request for \$688 for LeapFrog books for her pupils in a dual language program at Moylan School. The books, which are electronic and let students press words they don't know to hear them pronounced, allow pupils to stay engaged while Lewis works with other students individually or in small groups.

Lewis bought some LeapFrog books from a toy store herself, but she's hoping for books from DonorsChoose that are more academically focused. So far, donors have funded \$264. There may be more soon; Lewis has suggested family and friends consider giving to her project as a Christmas gift.

In nine Hartford-area districts, donations will bring extra money through a matching grant offered by an anonymous donor through the Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford. In Avon, East Granby, East Hartford, Granby, New Britain, Simsbury, Suffield, Wethersfield and Windsor, the donor will match up to \$5,000 in donations per district.

Petersen, who teaches at Alfred W. Hanmer Elementary School in Wethersfield, decided to ask for something that was "kind of luxury and kind of necessity." He had been borrowing globes from other classrooms, and figured he could use a set for almost every subject. "Fourth-graders have a really hard time understanding where they are in the world," he said. "This will really clarify it."

Carolyn Ikari, one of Petersen's citizen philanthropists, said the project spoke to her in part because as a child she loved looking at globes and feeling the different elevations.

Ikari lives in Wethersfield and has children at Hanmer, but she doesn't know Petersen. She typically tries to donate to needier school districts, but after a recent donation, she received a gift certificate for the site, and decided to use her "windfall" in her home district.

She likes the feedback she receives, including thank you notes from teachers and students, and the ability to target her donation to something teachers want for their pupils. "When it's the educators themselves that are identifying the need and advocating for the needs of their kids in their classrooms, it's a really powerful appeal," she said.

Farmington resident Jason Kinkle had similar reasons for picking DonorsChoose.org, where he funded a request for \$278 for books for first-graders at Dwight Elementary School in Hartford. Funding books for one classroom seemed like a more direct way to give, Kinkle said.

In his case, he chose teacher Rachel Costa's proposal, figuring that if she was passionate enough about the book — "Stargirl" by Jerry Spinelli — to convince him to pay for it, she would probably do a good job teaching it.



"Books can have a huge impact on you," particularly when taught by a teacher who is passionate, he said. "Who knows what one book could lead to?"

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