

August 2019

MADISON

An exclusive magazine serving
the residents of Madison, New Jersey
www.MadisonLivingNJ.com

LIVING



**STUDENT WISH LIST PROJECT:
SPREADING THE VOLUNTEER SPIRIT**

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By Rachel Barry

Photos provided by Tania Lee/Student Wish List Project.

Madison runs on the power of volunteers. From our mayor and council, the women of the Thursday Morning Club, the sports coaches, the Friends of the Library, and the countless other organizations and groups peopled by volunteers, our community is better and stronger thanks to those who share their time and talent giving back to their neighbors.

For parents looking to instill that spirit in their families, it's not always easy to find age-appropriate projects for school-age children. For many reasons—from the complexity of the projects to insurance concerns—the vast majority of volunteer opportunities aren't fitting for those big-hearted kids looking to change the world.

Last year Madison resident Tania Lee faced that dilemma with her own children and decided to do something about it. In September 2018 Lee, along with her family, Roberto, Max and Jackson Flores, founded Student Wish List Project (SWLP), a



nonprofit designed to help charities and children's hospitals increase their wish list fulfillment by helping students organize donation drives for wish list items. This helps other non-profits by helping them receive the in-kind donations (toys, backpacks, etc.) they need to serve the community while also providing children a chance to participate as volunteers. Lee calls this "an on-ramp to a lifetime of volunteer work."

Through the Student Wish List Project website, kids can elect to start a wish list donation drive for one of their partnered charities. They then will receive their own custom webpage, accessible only through a unique URL, which they can share with family and friends, and through which wish list items can be purchased. In most cases, items can be shipped directly to the charitable organization; for certain charities and for some items (e.g., groceries, gift cards), items may need to be collected by the student or by SWLP, which will arrange for delivery of the donations.

There are many reasons children use to kick-off their donation drives. "Some kids are very passionate about an issue—perhaps they've read a book or seen movie that really motivates them to support a cause. Other kids choose to start a donation drive for their birthdays in lieu of presents. It's really up to the individual child, and with so many donation partners there's truly a cause for every kid to get behind," says Lee.

Students who have conducted wish list donation drives are then eligible to apply to volunteer with SWLP's partnered charities or in-house with Student Wish List Project. These student volunteers have access to SWLP's database of volunteer opportunities, which includes exclusive opportunities as well as those within the larger community.

"We struggled to find community service experiences for my daughter, who is only in middle school but has wanted to do charitable work for years," said Stacy Bernstein of Livingston, NJ, whose daughter conducted an SWLP donation drive and now volunteers for Good Grief. "Student Wish List Project

made it really easy for her to start giving back immediately as well as establish a regular volunteer schedule with her chosen charity."

Gina McGuire of Madison agrees: "I've personally seen how simple and rewarding Student Wish List Project makes it for kids and schools to give back to the community. My boys have been involved in their donation drives and volunteer opportunities, and our high school has worked with them on multiple community service efforts. They make it super easy and fun for the kids!"

And the non-profits involved are reaping the rewards of the Lee family's innovation. In their first six months, Student Wish List Project has raised more than \$15,000 in donations for its partnered charities. Since its launch, sixty students have conducted twenty-eight wish list donation drives for partnered nonprofit organizations. Current partnered organizations include Baby2Baby, Backpacks for Life, Children's Hospital of New Jersey, Covenant House, Deirdre's House, Family Promise, Good Grief, Goryeb Children's Hospital, Homeless Solutions, Insulin for Life, JBWS, Mama D Feeds the Homeless, Nancy's Place, NJAS, Raphael's House, Saint Peter's Orphanage, and The Seeing Eye.

"Madison is an incredibly welcoming and supportive community that has allowed us to thrive individually and as a family," said Tania. "My hope is that we continue to grow — not just our nonprofit, but also as people and members of this community. We definitely found the right place to call home." ♦

For more information about The Student Wish List Project, visit www.studentwishlistproject.org



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