

The spirit of giving; Students at Bliss Carman Middle School are showing that it truly is better to give than to receive

By Lori Gallagher

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Students and staff at Bliss Carman Middle School have gotten into the spirit of the season in a big way.

On a local level, the school has come together to support a program collecting toys for the Fredericton Food Bank and those in need in our community. This is the second year they've done this.

"We at Bliss Carman had 50 angels from the Angel Tree and the food bank," says Heather Ingalls, a Great 8 language arts and social studies teacher and a literacy mentor at the school. "They were all middle school aged children, boys and girls."

Working together, they collected the items needed to fulfill all 50 of those Angel Tree wishes.

"All the families and students got involved at all of the grade levels, and some of the staff," she says. "It was fantastic and the kids really enjoyed it."

Clothing, toys, gift cards and stocking stuffers were among the items collected, with everything geared to a middle school age group.

Jasper Kristmanson, 13, was involved both last year and this year. He says it's a nice thing to do to help others.

"Ms. Ingalls said that we would be doing something for the community and I thought it was a good idea," says the Grade 8 student.

The project was also an opportunity for him to learn more about the local food bank.

"There are quite a few people who can't afford to get presents for Christmas and (who don't) have enough food on the table," says Jasper.

He admits he was surprised by this.

Shopping for gifts and stocking stuffers was made easier by the fact that the items were going to kids around his age.

"It was things I would like to get for Christmas," he says, such as an Empire Theatre movie gift card and T-shirts from Aeropostale and American Eagle.

Ingalls likes this project because it helps raise awareness among students about what's happening in their city.

"It's really great for the kids to give back to the community and at this age particularly they really like to give a gift," she says. "When you can couple that with somebody their own age, it really makes it more real to them how to give back to your own community."

She believes this is eye-opening for the students, who might not know much about the Fredericton Food Bank and the important work it does.

"Sometimes you're unaware, but once you become aware you become more involved," says Ingalls.

She's noticed a difference in the awareness levels in the students who participated in the Angel Tree program both years.

"Because it's their age group, it makes it more real to them that that kid is going to be excited over the gift that they receive because they got excited over it," she says.

"And they always seem to buy things that they enjoy getting."

Bliss Carman Middle School isn't just focused on local giving - they're taking a global perspective as well.

"FreddyLink, a local organization that works with World Vision, has coupled Fredericton with a community in Haiti in the Cobocol area," says Ingalls.

"Our school has sponsored three children. Every grade level has one child their age, so they'll take that child and support them on a global community level and support them for the three years they're at Bliss."

This helps raise student awareness of what goes on in the world around them.

"We talk a lot about world events and giving back to the community on a global level and what that looks like," she says.

This year, the annual Holli-o-grams that the school does will be raising money as part of this initiative.

"That's a great activity that our class (Grade 8) does with the Grade 6 class, so there is a lot of mentoring going on," says Ingalls.

She describes the Holli-o-grams as an act of kindness that students can purchase.

"They come in and buy a candy cane and they get delivered during the day to let somebody know that they're thinking of them, just within the school," she says. "It's a nice holiday spirit."

The Holli-o-grams can be bought and delivered this week, the last one before the holidays.

Helping both locally and nationally doesn't just make the students feel good, it's teaching them what it means to be a good citizen.

"Part of the curriculum for the students is to instill what citizenship is and what it looks like, so we at Bliss wanted to do that at a local community level so they're aware of what's going on around them and they can get involved in various community events or organizations that they choose," says Ingalls. "And also on a global level, what citizenship looks like there as well."

Doing this helps change the students in positive ways.

"Every year you see students who actually change. If we visit the Community Kitchen, for example, some students had no idea what that looked like. It dispels a lot of stereotypes they had previously and they realize those are kids and people just like me," she says.

Plus the students take what they learn home and share it with their families.

"I just find that the families and the students are so giving, and the families are so supportive of having their kids involved," says Ingalls.

On top of that, she notes that two businesses - Altus Group and The Learning Bar - are helping some of the families in the Bliss Carman school community this holiday season.

"As well, a private organization is sponsoring two families. Our staff has a gift card program that also supports families within our school community," she says.

"The support throughout Fredericton during this time of year is truly amazing, and is especially evident at BCMS."