

School Project Develops Future Philanthropists

By CYNTHIA GASNER, Special to The CJN

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TORONTO — Project Give Back, a unique program for students in grades 4 and 5, has left an indelible mark on the students who participated in it, their teachers say. Ellen Schwartz, a Grade 4 teacher at Eitz Chaim Day School, developed the project in her general studies class four years ago. The goal was to teach children empathy, compassion, philanthropy and communal responsibility, all of which require the efforts of both the home and the school. It has received rave reports from educators and charitable organizations.

The students participating in Project Give Back choose a charity and then learn to research information about their chosen charity, its mission and its activities. They then put the information into their own words.

Each student creates a visual presentation and a speech on the chosen charity and speaks about why that charity inspired him or her to try to help raise funds for the charity

“The children raise awareness for their chosen charity,” Schwartz says. The project, which closely follows the Ministry of Education’s guidelines to enhance the grade 4/5 language arts program, has helped more than 160 different organizations, and many students have exceeded their teachers’ expectations. “The children have risen to the challenge,” says Schwartz, who has experience and a passion for establishing charitable activities. She co-founded Jacob’s Ladder in 1998, a charity named for her son, Jacob, who was born with Canavan disease, a severe neurodegenerative disorder.

The escalating success of the project is reflected in the expanding number of Hebrew and public schools that participate and the increasing number of teachers being trained for the next school year.

Schwartz told The CJN that more than 500 students in classes in Hebrew and public schools are now participating in Project Give Back, including Crestwood School, Eitz Chaim’s Spring Farm and Viewmount branches, Netivot HaTorah Day School, United Synagogue Day School’s Beth Tzedec campus, Leo Baeck Day School’s south campus, and the Allenby and John Ross Roberston public schools.

“We hope to double the program in both public and Hebrew schools next year,” Schwartz says. “I believe that the project develops character, builds confidence and life skills.

“We all know that if we give our children the proper tools, positive guidance and a

belief in their accomplishments, the sky is the limit.” Schwartz’s son Jacob visits the classes so that the students can see the source of her desire to help other children with special needs.

“The students ask well-thought-out questions about Jacob to learn how his day to day life differs from theirs, and they learn that even though he can’t walk, talk, see, eat or even breathe easily, he can easily smile,” Schwartz says.

“They learn the power of a smile, and actually see the contagious nature and impact a smile can have on others. Over the course of that one class, their attitudes are quickly transformed from fear to acceptance.”

Project Give Back was launched with the help of several corporate sponsors, including Starbucks. It’s operating in partnership with UJA Federation of Greater Toronto, where individual donors can receive charitable tax receipts for directed gifts supporting Hebrew day schools.