

AVALANCHE OF KINDNESS

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The Cereal Heroes deputized kindergartner Max Gagnon to bring 17 “comfort bundles” to the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute earlier this week. Gagnon is shown at front, behind him, from left, are Andrew Ehmann, Nathan Hobby, Landen Brothers, Niko Condodemetrak, Caden Tucker, Rowan Jones, Carter Jones, Matthew Beaupre, Lex Condodemetrak and Kyle Wilk. (Adam Drapcho/Laconia Daily Sun)

‘Cereal Heroes’ donate blankets to sick children at Dana-Farber

By ADAM DRAPCHO, LACONIA DAILY SUN

LACONIA — It’s been a busy winter for the Cereal Heroes, a growing group of boys, all Pleasant Street School students, who were moved to help stock a local food pantry that was running low on breakfast staples right before Christmas.

One good turn begets another, they soon found. That first gesture was performed by two friends and one of their moms. Those two were soon joined by another two friends, and the foursome started spending snow days shoveling driveways to raise funds for a school program that sends needy children home with food for the weekend.

In just a few months, the Cereal Heroes group has now swelled to ten members – all boys, all students in either fourth or fifth grade – who have found that they can make a real difference in the lives of people around them.

The Cereal Heroes are led by moms Elizabeth Brothers and Andrea Condodemetrak. The membership fee is two boxes of cereal, and there’s only one rule: Always Be Kind.

Kindness is contagious, the Heroes have learned. When Bank of New Hampshire learned about the group, the bank donated \$500 to the Pleasant Street School PAWS program, which makes sure kids don't go hungry when they're not in school. That was enough to fund the program through the end of the school year.

But the Heroes weren't ready to hang up their shovels. With the PAWS program taken care of for now, they made sure every public school in Laconia had a hearty stock of breakfast bars. They have also made supply runs to a food pantry run by a city church, and to a shelter for victims of domestic violence.

Soon, more kids wanted to get in on the good deeds. For the most recent shoveling event, ten boys spent the cold, windy day clearing driveways. Many of the clients arranged for the shoveling service via the group's Facebook page, and paid to have the Heroes clear the driveway for someone else. The group raised nearly \$250 that day.

"It was brutal. It was cold, windy," said Condodemetraky. "The boys were very tired but very happy that the donations were coming in."

One of the newer recruits is Nathan Hobby, a fifth-grader, who said the money was hard-earned. "We shoveled a lot of driveways," he said. "It was really cold and windy, but you've just got to see it through. It was a bit hard, I was a bit tired after it all, and so were all my friends."

To keep himself motivated, he said that he focused on the people they were helping, and of the other Heroes that were all working together.

"I knew that the people, they had to get out of their driveways somehow. I knew that my friends were all feeling the same thing."

When they finally finished shoveling and returned to the Condodemetraky home for snacks, Brothers asked the boys to think of how they might use their proceeds from the day. Soon, conversation settled around Max Gagnon, a kindergartner at Pleasant Street who has been battling leukemia for a year and a half. Max's dad, Mike, told Condodemetraky that their family has already benefited from an outpouring of support from the community, and suggested that the Heroes could do something to help other patients at the Jimmy Fund Clinic at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston.

On Tuesday, the Heroes surprised Gagnon with 17 "comfort bundles" – fleece blankets, coloring books and crayons – for him to take with him to his next treatment, and pass out to other young patients.

"I wanted to join the Cereal Heroes because I wanted to help people in the community. I just really wanted to help people and be kind and show people that younger people can still make a difference," said Hobby.

The day of shoveling wasn't easy, but he said seeing Gagnon and thinking about the result of the work made it worthwhile.

"That felt amazing, to give Max the blankets and know that he was going to take them to the hospital and give them to his friends, that felt like the best thing in the world, to think of the smiling faces of those children," said Hobby.

Condodemetraky said that the group is hoping to grow further, but has to figure out how to handle the logistics. Ten boys is already testing the limits of her home as a headquarters, and safely shepherding that many shovelers on a snowy day is challenging. But seeing the pride and sense of purpose in the young Heroes drives her to figure out the next step.

"My hope is that we can do one amazing thing per quarter, as well as doing things to keep the money coming in," she said. "Now we move on to the next project. With this group, there's no telling what we can do next."

"What started off as a snowy day idea has turned into an avalanche of kindness. It has been amazing to see how much of a difference we have made in other people's lives ... It's pretty cool, with all the stuff going on in the world, it's nice to know that we can look out for the people in our own backyards and make a difference in Laconia."



Landen Brothers hands an official Cereal Heroes hat to Max Gagnon, making him part of the group finding ways to perform acts of kindness. (Adam Drapcho/Laconia Daily Sun)