

Up to something good

Mom hopes Web site she created will help kids inspire other kids to do community service.

By THERESA WALKER
The Orange County Register

The little things one child does can add up to big things that many children do, by themselves or with others.

Bridget Belden believes this wholeheartedly. It's what drives this mom from Santa Ana to pour her passion into the Web site she launched in November.

It's called Ripple Kids™. The idea is to acknowledge children who have tackled a problem in their communities or beyond.

Kids could be holding a bake sale to raise money for a family devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Forming a club whose purpose is to help others. Donating their hair to an organization that makes wigs for young cancer victims.

These are the good deeds done by Orange County kids – including Belden's own two children – that are featured now on the fledgling site.

"We're focusing on kids who take the initiative themselves," Belden says. "All I want to do is call attention to these individual efforts."

Take Ava Nicolai, 12, of Orange, who grew her ponytail out for two years, all the way down to her waist, before cutting it last March to donate to Locks of Love.

"I wanted to inspire other people to donate their hair," Ava says. "That was kind of my goal."

She inspired herself, too. Besides planning to grow her hair long again and make another donation to Locks of Love, Ava is already thinking about how to help others far into her future.

"I think when I'm older I'd like to donate a lot of money to charities and get involved in some charity work."

Belden's hope is that "Ripple Kids™" like Ava will inspire others who'd like to help but don't know how – or those who aren't thinking about community service yet.

"I want to market community service," says Belden, 40, whose professional background includes a stint as director of e-commerce for Lucky Brand jeans.

She left her job with Lucky Brand to spend more time with her children, Megan, 11, and C.J., 8, and to make www.ripplekids.com a reality.

Belden says when she turned 35 she found herself soul-searching – looking at her life, thinking about how to make it more meaningful – when her daughter inadvertently supplied the answer.

Megan was about 7 at the time and like most children that age was unfettered by the kind of negative thinking that can be a barrier to tackling a problem. Belden says she became more aware of Megan's ability to look at something and want to help, to simply take action.

"I realized we'd be out and there would be a homeless guy on the corner and she would want to give him a dollar. From her perspective, she could really help this guy, help end homelessness by giving him a dollar. From my perspective, he was just going to go out and spend it on alcohol."

That recognition of children's ability to look past obstacles and focus on a goal eventually led Belden to begin searching for stories about youngsters who have initiated community service projects.

"I was struck by how few stories of that kind there are in the media," she says. "I know they're out there. It's just finding them and publicizing that."

For starters, she looked right in her own home and community for kids who were up to something good.

In the summer of 2005, her daughter Megan and friends Kayla Ryan and Jaci Brown, also 11, decided to spend their free time on something beyond the sports they all play. They formed a club whose mission is to help people.

The girls researched online to find a worthy cause, held a bake sale and sent the \$137 they raised to the humanitarian organization CARE USA to help feed hungry children in Africa.

"We held a lot of meetings and we Googled and we Yahooed," Kayla says of the research effort.

The images of other children in need helped them decide what to do.

"There were some really sad pictures," Megan says.

While they did need help from adults to bake all the brownies, cookies, lemon bars and raspberry bars they sold and other logistics, the girls led the project.

Another group of Ripple Kids™ that included Megan's brother C.J. and schoolmates Wesley Greene, 9, Alexander Greene, 8, and Jarred Greene, 6, held their own bake sale last Memorial Day to raise money for a family from their school whose new home in New Orleans was destroyed by Hurricane Katrina.

They spread the word to kids in their classrooms and ended up with enough donations of goods, along with what they baked, to raise \$1,400.

"We were surprised, because our goal was about \$800," Alexander says.

Their success empowered them.

"It's almost like anything you do," Wesley says, "if you try really hard and put your minds to it."

Belden is careful to protect the privacy of children featured on the Web site. She uses first names only and gets parents' permission. For now she's focusing on kids ages 7-12.

To get the word out about the Web site, she has called friends and acquaintances, contacted local publications, set up a table at a local kids' race and met with school officials.

This month Arroyo Elementary in the Tustin Unified School District is joining with Ripple Kids™ to celebrate children at the school who initiate community service projects.

They'll be recognized at the monthly awards assembly, with their pictures and a brief description of their projects featured on a Ripple Kids™ wall at the school. They'll also get a Ripple Kids™ T-shirt and certificate and their parents can contact Belden about featuring them on the Web site.

The first two Ripple Kids™ honorees from Arroyo will be fifth-graders Emma Foss, who donated her hair to Locks of Love over the Christmas holidays, and Anastasia Columbo, who collected sweaters and sweatshirts to send to the Russian orphanage where she was adopted.

Arroyo principal Maggie Villegas loves Belden's idea of rippling.

"Kids are so influenced by each other, it serves as a great way to present positive role models," Villegas says. "It's fun to explain that to the kids that every time they do something it affects somebody or something else."

Arroyo also will organize a core group of about 20 kids who want to form a Ripple Kids™ service club that will coordinate school service projects.

Belden also hopes to work with the Angels and the Anaheim Ducks to spotlight during their games the children who make it on the Ripple Kids™ Web site.

And look for a Ripple Kids™ booth at the Spirit Run in Newport Beach in March.

"I know it's a matter of time," Belden says. "I know it from the bottom of my soul it's going to be a big organization that can have an impact."

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GROUP EFFORT: Bridget Belden, shown here with some youth volunteers, launched the Ripple Kids™ Web site to celebrate kids who take the initiative to do community service projects. Back row, from left, are Kayla Ryan, Megan Belden, Bridget Belden and Wesley Greene. Front row, from left, are Jaci Brown, C.J. Belden and Alexander Greene.

NICK KOON, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Follow the leaders

When you need advice, go to the experts.

Here are some tips from Ripple Kids™ on making a community service project a success, especially if it's a bake sale:

Jarred Greene, 6: "Put a lot of food out and put signs up."

Alexander Greene, 8: "Plan. Have everything ready."

C.J. Belden, 8: "Always be prepared. You can't just walk outside and say, 'Bake sale!'"

Wesley Greene, 9: "If you make a sign, don't just put 'Bake Sale' on it. Make it creative. Don't just put out plain cookies. Put some frosting and sprinkles on them."

Jaci Brown, 11: "Really organize. Have a goal on how much money you want to raise, because it depends on how much you bake."

Kayla Ryan, 11: "Put out the word before it happens. Make fliers and post them. Put an ad in the newspaper."

Megan Belden, 11: "Have as many volunteers as possible. Send out fliers and e-mails."

Ripple Kids™

For more information on Ripple Kids™, or to become a Ripple Kid, go to www.ripplekids.com.

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