

Children find out how much good they can do

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ENCINITAS — The students at Brain Highways took the challenge to raise money for homeless families very seriously. Through a series of fundraising efforts created by the students, the group raised \$6,000 that they donated in person to the San Diego Rescue Mission on June 14.

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Many of the students know the challenges associated with fear, loneliness and anxiety. Some of the children have been diagnosed with autism, attention deficit disorder and bipolar disorder. Each one comes to the center created by Nancy Sokol Green of Encinitas with their own set of difficulties. However, Sokol Green believes that focusing on each child's potential rather than their perceived limits helps to alleviate the stress of behavioral and academic problems.

Sokol Green said she came up with the idea of giving a group of her students, who she called Executive Project Leaders, the responsibility for raising money from a television show. "I saw Oprah giving people who were already successful the opportunity to give away money and see how it made them feel," she said. "I thought about how it would make our kids feel to be able to help someone else."

Jenna Hillman, director of Women and Children's services at the homeless shelter, said the group was well-received by the residents. "It went great," she said. "The Brain Highways kids were really excited about the 'brain toys' they brought and took the time to play with our kids and really interact."

The group solicited donations from local businesses and exceeded their fundraising expectations. With the money raised, the group donated \$100 gift cards to each family staying in the long-term program and a \$1,400 check to the mission. In addition, the group brought along a 50" flat screen TV, a DVD player, an Xbox 360, video games, Razor scooters, \$500 worth of books and "brain toys" that are used at the center.

Sokol Green said the experience gave her students a sense of pride and self-esteem at having accomplished such an enormous task. "Keep in mind that the Brain Highways kids have diagnoses, and so most if not all folks have dismissed these kids as never being able to do something like this," she said.

Sokol Green said it was important for the students to physically be at the mission to present the donation. "I didn't want to just drop off a check." In fact, the students added a personal touch by having everyone who donated money to the effort put a handprint on a mural that was then given to the residents. "The mission kids and moms were very grateful and seemed especially touched by the fact that kids had done this for them," Sokol Green said. "The mission kids wanted to hang the mural of the 500 helping hands and read the names signed on each hand."

To Sokol Green, the hands represented someone who was motivated by her students to give. "It took a lot for them to do this project," she said.

Parents of the students told Sokol Green that the confidence their children gained through the project has had reverberating effects. "One girl received an award at her school, recognizing her for her compassion and leadership in helping the mission kids," she said. "Both the families at the mission and the kids involved in the project thought it was a life memory."

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