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Holladay: Kids share dreams in a hat

BYLINE: By Tabatha Deans Close-Up Staff

What do you get when you combine 30 second-graders from St. Vincent DePaul Catholic School with books, hats and children in need?

A 6-foot tall "hat" tree, which will be donated to Primary Children's Medical Center for use by young cancer patients.

Students wrote and created a story about a magical hat tree. It will be bound and hung from a tree parents made, along with hats that each student decorated with trinkets to illustrate their stories.

Isabelle Armstrong, 8, said she hopes her story and hat will cheer up a child with cancer.

"My story's about . . . hats that fly off and go throughout the city looking for people in need," said Armstrong.

Nash Elder, 8, wrote a story about planting a diamond seed that grows into a hat tree, and used plastic jewels to decorate the accompanying hat, which he hopes cheer up the patients.

"It makes me feel good to help them. I put a palm tree on the hat so they can think about a vacation somewhere," Elder said.

Teacher Rea Hristou helped organize the project, which originally involved decorating hats for patients. Hristou discovered that there was little space for storage at the hospital, and the concept of the hat "tree" was born.

Parents Michelle and Bob Elder built the tree, and each student painted one "branch" to hang their book and hat on. Although the same students won't decorate the tree every year, Hristou and school officials hope decorating the tree will become an annual tradition.

"This has been a gift for all of us, not just the patients," Hristou said. "The parents got excited, the students got excited. It's been wonderful having them work together to help others."

The school used money obtained through a SHOPA Kids in Need Foundation grant, which they used to buy several types of hats, including golf hats and baseball caps - as well as items to decorate the hats.

In addition to helping cancer patients, students learned how to create an original story, proper editing techniques and expressed their individuality.

"It's important to realize that the students are taught ownership and empowerment," said assistant principal Robyn Giovacchini. "They know their gift of individuality is part of the donation."

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GRAPHIC: Second-graders at St. Vincent de Paul Catholic School decorate hats to go with stories they have written as part of a "hat tree" project. Below, Emilie Bero wears a hat she decorated. The hats and the tree will be delivered to Primary Children's Medical Center.