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First-grader with a big heart helps foster kids

By ALEXANDRA CALDWELL

A first-grader is touching the lives of thousands of foster kids throughout Pinellas and Pasco counties.

Cameron Woods, 6 ½, of Palm Harbor was inspired when two foster girls moved in across the street and were later adopted by his neighbors. So when his gifted program teachers at Brooker Creek Elementary told his class that they must each pick a service project and then report on it, Cameron knew exactly what he wanted to do.

"I decided to do this project because we had some kids who were adopted at Eckerd Youth Alternatives ... and they were in the neighborhood and then were finally adopted," Cameron said. "We had stuff we needed to give away to someone, so we just decided to do that (give things to foster kids.) And after we did that, we went around the neighborhood and we e-mailed friends and dropped letters in neighbors' mailboxes explaining about the project."

Cameron first dropped off two SUVs full of items in January, one to Eckerd Youth Alternatives in Clearwater, and one to the Upper Pinellas Pregnancy Center in Tarpon Springs. Cameron and his family recently dropped off another car load of items to Eckerd's Largo Center on March 12. Cameron remembered that Associ-

ate Vice President of Eckerd Youth Alternatives, Karen Bonsignori, told him that his donations made a difference, so he wanted to keep helping.

"She said it would make a difference in the world, about 1,000 kids, and I wanted to keep doing this because it made a difference for kids that don't have stuff," Cameron said.

It was Cameron's determination and effort that allowed him to tackle such a large project for such a young person.

"When he first came home with this gifted project to do, I kind of tried to talk him into something easier," said Shawn Woods, his father. "But he said absolutely not, this is what we're going to do, and we're going to stick to it."

Shawn said he is proud of his son because he and his wife, Colleen, always try to teach their children to make decisions for themselves.

"We're very proud of his determination and dedication," Colleen said. "He gets his mind set that he's going to do something and he puts his heart into it. Just everything comes from his heart in everything that he does."

There are about 80 houses in their neighborhood, Shawn said, and nearly everyone participated in Cameron's project. What particularly touched Shawn was



Photo by
ALEXANDRA CALDWELL

Cameron Woods, 6 ½, loads a bag of donated items into a wagon with his brother, Aiden, 1. Parents Shawn and Colleen also help load bags onto a cart to donate to Eckerd Youth Alternatives' foster care program.

that it wasn't just the adults donating items – many kids brought over items, such as scooters and toys, to donate to the cause.

Bonsignori said that when she learned of his initial donation in January, she thought "Oh, how wonderful." So when the day of the donation arrived, Eckerd showed up with one cart.

"Then we saw just bags and bags and bags and more bags," Bonsignori said. "So we went and got all the dollies in the building at Eckerd Youth Alternatives and several people. I think we made five or six trips with all of those people. And when we had gone through all

the items, there were nearly 1,000 items that were donated in that first round. So I know that the start of this project was a community service project for school, but I think Cameron went above and beyond the call of duty, and I could tell that he really took this project to heart."

Between both trips, she said Cameron has helped nearly all the foster kids in the program.

April Putzulu, communications manager for Eckerd Youth Alternatives, said that on any given day, they have about 3,100 children in foster care in Pinellas and Pasco counties. They try to stabilize them into permanent

foster families immediately, but that can be difficult, as there is always a shortage of foster families, Putzulu said. It is increasingly challenging with sibling groups, trying to keep them all together. A few weeks ago Eckerd took in a sibling group of five kids, she said, and it is hard to find a foster family with enough available beds.

When kids initially enter into foster care, they are in the greatest need of items such as clothing, shoes, toiletries and other essentials, Putzulu said.

Gina and Jack Doan are the couple who adopted the two girls and inspired Cameron's project. Gina said they tried for about five years to have biological children and at that point began to look into adoption through private agencies. However, after some research, she said they decided there was an even greater need for foster parents, so they took a course for interested foster parents through Eckerd Youth Alternatives. About 75 percent of their class dropped out, she said, because they did not think they could handle the worst case scenarios.

The Doans, however, had a wonderful experience, Gina said.

"We have a very, very positive story about the foster system," Gina said. "We took in two girls about three years ago and started fostering them, and it's been wonderful because we've had a lot of support, and the people we worked with (at Eckerd) were great, and we ended up adopting our girls this past September, and now they're a permanent part of our family."

The older girl was about 7 1/2 when she came to the Doans, and in her six months in foster care, the Doans were her third foster home. Her younger sister went straight from the hospital into the older girl's second foster home, and both girls came to the Doans when they were



Photos by ALEXANDRA CALDWELL

Left: Aiden Woods, 1, rides with bags of items to donate to Eckerd Youth Alternatives' foster care program. Right: Cameron Woods, 6 1/2, shows off items he collected to donate to Eckerd Youth Alternatives' foster care program. He stands in the resource room at Eckerd's new Largo center where foster kids can get needed items such as clothes, shoes and toiletries.

7 1/2 and 5 months old.

"I think the misconception that a lot of people have is that these kids are not good kids or they've been through too much and they don't want to disrupt their family," Gina said, "but so many of these kids are good kids that come from bad situations, and it's just been so positive for us."

Gina said foster families receive lots of support and Eckerd tries to make good matches between kids and foster families.

"I think the most important thing is that you're very honest with the caseworker up front with what you're willing to accept as far as special needs, history of abuses or anything," Gina said. "You need to be honest with them, especially if you already have kids in the home. So you don't take them and then suddenly realize 'It's not working for me, you have to take them back, because that impacts them and they have to move again.'"

At first, some of the kids in the neighborhood were confused as to where the

girls came from, Gina said, and one child asked the Doans if they bought them. She said both their situation and Cameron's project has helped educate both the kids and the parents in the neighborhood about fostering and adopting, as well as to the needs that these kids have.

"Many times they come with nothing," Gina said. "Just the clothes on their back or just a bag with a few things in it or a stuffed animal. So I think (Cameron) just got that point across that there's this need for new things for kids coming into the foster system."

Lisa Beck, one of Cameron's neighbors, said she received Cameron's letter in her mailbox, so she gathered some children's toys to donate to his cause. She said she was glad that he was helping bring awareness to the issue.

One of Cameron's gifted program teachers, Candace Ianello, said that all the kids in the class were assigned to do a service project, and she hopes they learn from the

project and that maybe they will want to continue helping even after the project is complete.

"He's very conscientious and enthusiastic, and he's a good student," Ianello said. "He always gives 100 percent."

Eckerd Youth Alternatives serves more than 12,000 children nationwide annually, Bonsignori said, and the organization is always in need of donations, mentors, foster parents, adoptive parents, and volunteers.

**To learn more on
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