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Homeless get helping hand

Shy eighth grader helps amass 40 boxes of clothing



By **MEGHAN GILBERT**
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Surrounded by boxes spilling over with coats, jeans, and other clothing donated for the homeless through his efforts, a shy James Jeffries says he tried to do it anonymously.

Inspired by a television show where people gave away their belongings to the homeless, James decided to go through his things - and those of his late grandfather - to give to others in need.

James Jeffries inspired classmates at Winterfield Venture Academy to collect clothes for the homeless.

(THE BLADE/LORI KING)

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Now his two boxes of clothing are among more than 40 donated at his school, Winterfield Venture Academy, for men, women, and children in the Toledo area.

"People just starting bringing them in. I'm kind of amazed," said James, 14, an eighth grader who will go to St. John's Jesuit High School next year. "I just thought I'd get a box or two."



He approached school leaders in late February wondering if they would help coordinate a donation drive. He tried to remain anonymous, but word got out.

Aware of the state of the economy, James didn't expect any large gifts for his birthday and decided the next best thing would be to give something.

Sonya Newton, a student-family liaison at Winterfield, was inspired when James approached her with the idea and was glad to answer his call for help.

And so the "Homeless Hook Up" was under way.

During March, the school is collecting gently used and new clothing. The men's clothes will go to the Cherry Street Mission, women's to battered women's shelters of the YWCA, and children's items will go to Family House.

"I was so proud of him," said Ms. Newton, who created a flyer to encourage donations and is helping with the organization. "It seems today so many of our youth are focused on what they can get, not what they can give."

James' grandmother, Maryann Jeffries, said he always has been mature beyond his years with thinking of others.

"If he could just pass a coat to a person who needed it, that's all he wanted," Mrs. Jeffries said.

James, who tried to shy away from the attention, put it simply: "I just hope I can touch a few hearts."

It's inspirational for the school that has received a surprising number of donations that parent volunteers, including Mrs. Jeffries, have helped sort for the charities. Principal Amy Kramer said she's overwhelmed with James' idea and the response.

"I hope it's contagious," she said. "I hope other students get that spark that he has."

Longtime homeless advocate Ken Leslie, who founded Toledo Tent City and IMatters, said young people are best responding to the needs of the community.

"To see children responding, it gives us hope for a future for everybody," he said.

While it's hard to put a number on the area's homeless, he said it's absolutely on the rise.

"Until the economic crisis reverses, there's no other course than increased poverty and increased homelessness," he said.

It's believed that 3,000 to 5,000 people become homeless annually in northwest Ohio, but most of those are for a short period of time after a fire, eviction, or similar situation, Mr. Leslie said. About 10 to 15 percent of those are the chronically homeless stereotype, he said.

The most recent survey in the Toledo area counted 945 people on Jan. 27.

That "point-in-time" population count by the Toledo Area Alliance to End Homelessness and the Toledo Lucas County Homelessness Board was 145 more than the same time in 2007 and higher than the summer count of 911, said the Rev. Deb Conklin, director of the board.

The count includes people living in emergency shelters, transitional housing, and unsheltered.

"We know that homelessness is going up," she said.

More than 2,000 people received services last year and Ms. Conklin expects that number to rise.

"We don't think we've seen the bottom," she said. "We think we'll easily reach 1,000 homeless this summer."

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