



PAY IT FORWARD

The Kilpatrick Koalas Give Back to the Katy Community

Written by Heather Lowrie & Select Photography by Suzi Issa

Odessa Kilpatrick Elementary might seem like an ordinary school on the outside, but within its walls, there is something extraordinary taking place. The students, teachers, and administrators are changing lives in the Katy community with the Pay It Forward program.

Principal Malynn Rodriguez took the initiative to challenge her staff to do something good for someone else. She gave each team a single

\$100 bill in October and simply wanted them to work together, get their students involved, and use that money as a tool to transform the life of someone else.

During a breakfast in December, the teams came together and presented what they did with the money. No one could have ever

Kilpatrick teachers, along with their students, recently raised more than \$29,000 for the community through the Pay It Forward program



imagined that collectively they would raise more than \$29,000. Third-grade teacher Christi Corbin says, “Pay it Forward is a wonderful opportunity for the faculty and students at Kilpatrick to look outside of ourselves. We can all get so caught up in our own wants and needs and day-to-day activities. When we take a moment to look around at what others may need, it is truly humbling and inspiring.”

The Pay It Forward Plan

This is the third year OKE has continued the Pay It Forward tradition. The life-changing program begins with a generous \$1,000 donation from a local business. Teachers and staff members are then divided into 10 teams, with each team receiving \$100. Together, they brainstorm a plan for spending the money and how they will make it grow. Rodriguez doesn't put any parameters on the program, other than the teams' sole purpose is to think of someone else. “Every year it gets more special,” says Rodriguez. “The teams amaze me, and just when you think you have seen it all, something else wonderful happens and it's contagious.”

Rodriguez is a graduate of Katy High School and was also one of the students at the original Kilpatrick Elementary School. Her heart for this community is what makes her one of Katy's best, and it's the Pay It Forward program that shows how blessed the Kilpatrick community is to call her one of their own.

No Greater Joy

As the teams were brainstorming how to best use the money, the kindergarten teachers heard about a courageous cancer patient named Lucy Schuler. It was through her family that they heard about the Snowdrop Foundation. Kindergarten teacher Laura Bennett says, “After reading about the Snowdrop Foundation's mission and all of the wonderful things they do for families that are hurting from this disease, we knew we wanted to do what we could.” Together, they asked the students to get sponsors for a 30-minute walk that would benefit the Snowdrop Foundation. They collected over \$4,600 in Schuler's honor. They didn't stop there. Some of the teachers went around to local businesses and asked for gift cards and merchandise donations.

The local community was so generous, and the Kilpatrick team collected \$700 worth of gift cards, coupons, and merchandise that went straight to Schuler's family. They came together and presented the gift to Schuler and her family in a special ceremony. “It was something I will never forget,” says Bennett. “The joy on everyone's face was priceless. It was such an amazing feeling to know that we had turned \$100 into \$5,300. And even more important, our students had hands-on experience that no textbooks could replicate.”



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Kilpatrick's third-grade team of teachers (back row) Dana Oberman, Katie Richards, Sharron Murphey, Julie Breath, Julie Galyon, Joey Rhodair, (front row) Alyson Goddard, Lauren LeVrier, Christi Corbin, and Amy Dufrene



The OKE front office team, which coordinated a canned food drive, includes (back row) Kathleen Wilkenin, Mona Howe, Malton Rodriguez, Barb Kosse, Koli Gutierrez Sanchez, (front row) Cheri Jordan, Kelly Sauer, Lisa Morris, Heather Williams, and Lisa Barzilla



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Kilpatrick third-grade students and teachers made fleece blankets to give to the elderly



Kilpatrick's first-grade team of teachers, who raised funds for gifts for needy families, includes (back row) Cari Bickham, Lis Wicker, Amy Branch, Kara Jones, Rosanne Robins (front row) Kallie Roman, Blanche Wriborg, Polly Brock, and Molly Lowers

Valuable Life Lessons

The teachers at Kilpatrick realize the value of life lessons that students will remember forever. Fourth-grade teacher and cancer survivor Tanncy Rau had a personal connection with Garrett Peterson, a boy on her son's baseball team who was fighting stage-four cancer. Her fourth-grade students, parents, and teachers collectively raised over \$1,500 toward the Garrett Peterson Benefit Fund.

"Unfortunately, Garrett lost his courageous bout with cancer shortly before Christmas on Dec. 22," says Rau. "Pay It Forward gives a chance for all of us to be a part of real life lessons and learn the true meaning of life. Those teachable moments are usually only theories found within the textbooks from which we teach." And because of this program, they made a difference in the life and memory of Peterson that will never be forgotten.

Cancer fighters weren't the only recipient of the Pay It Forward program. The third-grade teachers thought about the elderly who often get overlooked. They wanted to make no-sew fleece blankets with their students, and with the overwhelming support and donations from their parents, they were able to achieve their goal. Not only did they get to make the blankets, but they delivered them, as well. Corbin says, "The delight on the students' and residents' faces was priceless. The third graders learned how great it felt to do something kind and unexpected for others." When it comes to giving back, no task is too great for these teachers and students when inspiration is embedded in their hearts.

The Sky Is the Limit

The first year Pay It Forward started, OKE students and teachers raised over \$8,600. The second year that number increased to over \$10,000. And this past year, the teachers, staff, parents, students, and Katy community went above and beyond with the \$29,000 they raised. They have sacrificed their time on the weekends, even before and after school, getting their own husbands and various family members involved to make a difference in the life of someone else. "Generous hearts" has become the program's motto and a simple reminder of what the Kilpatrick community represents.

"Each year, it is so beautiful to see the different ways people are blessed by the staff at OKE," shares Corbin. "There is no greater joy than to know you may have let a stranger know you love them, that you think about them, and that you care enough to put forth some effort to show them how much they are loved." From reaching out to cancer patients and the forgotten elderly to showing support for soldiers in Iraq and even animals in shelters, the Kilpatrick community is changing lives just by getting involved.

What can you do with \$100 and whose life can you impact, so this Pay It Forward tradition can live outside the walls of Kilpatrick Elementary, making a palpable difference in our Katy community? You might think you are the one changing a life, and in return, your life might be touched in ways you never imagined. Pay it forward!
KM

HEATHER LOWRIE loves encouraging others through her writing and enjoys life in the Katy area. She is married to the love of her life and has three children.

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