

Hearts for Health

Students at Hayes Elementary and Memorial Parkway Junior High team up to raise funds for the Woodward family

Written by Noreen Stavinoha | Select Photography by Jason Lehecka

As Katy ISD sister schools, Hayes Elementary and Memorial Parkway Junior High team up to support students in their educational journey. Now, they are teaming up to help Katy resident Mike Woodward in his fight for health. “It’s very humbling to know so many people are doing something for me,” Woodward says, as he watches students from both schools painstakingly decorate ceramic hearts at a nearby table. The hearts they are painting are part of the Hearts for Health project begun by Hayes Elementary art teacher Valerie O’Leary to raise money for medical expenses associated with Woodward’s liver transplant.

Awaiting an Organ Transplant

After being diagnosed with chronic viral hepatitis C several years ago, Woodward was given both of the medications that have proven successful in the treatment of the disease. However, he was one of the small number of patients for whom neither of them was effective, so now he is on the transplant list at St. Luke’s Episcopal Hospital. Insurance will cover part of the cost, but not all of it, so there will be substantial out-of-pocket expense for the Woodward family.

Before his illness struck and for some time after his initial diagnosis, Woodward was a successful builder of fine homes. While that career was very rewarding, it was also stressful, so he went from cutting back to stopping altogether. He is no longer able to work at anything, because he is so easily fatigued.

A Meaningful Way to Give Back

Woodward’s wife, Marcy, was a secretary at Hayes Elementary School when her husband’s condition reached its most critical stage in 2011. She shared the story with her school friends, including O’Leary, who has a long history of helping others through her artistic talent. She began brainstorming ways

to help her friend’s husband and finally settled on creating ceramic hearts. “I don’t handle the money,” shares O’Leary. “I just like the giving. I’m not into sales, but I like to be involved in the manufacturing and refinement of a product. I can do the packaging to make them attractive.”

O’Leary also knows how to draw her students in to the notion of using their considerable artistic talents to help someone in need. Some of Hayes Elementary’s students from the fourth and fifth grades stepped up to the plate volunteering their free time to help prepare hearts. Ribbons were attached, so they could be worn as necklaces. Some were sold to school staff, and a large number were sold at the church that the Woodwards attend for \$5 each.

Some of O’Leary’s former art students, who are now attending Memorial Parkway Junior High, frequently stop back by Hayes to visit. Last fall, when they dropped in to say hello, they noticed the project O’Leary was working on and asked to be part of it. “That really touched my heart, seeing them take it upon themselves to do something meaningful for someone else,” O’Leary shares.

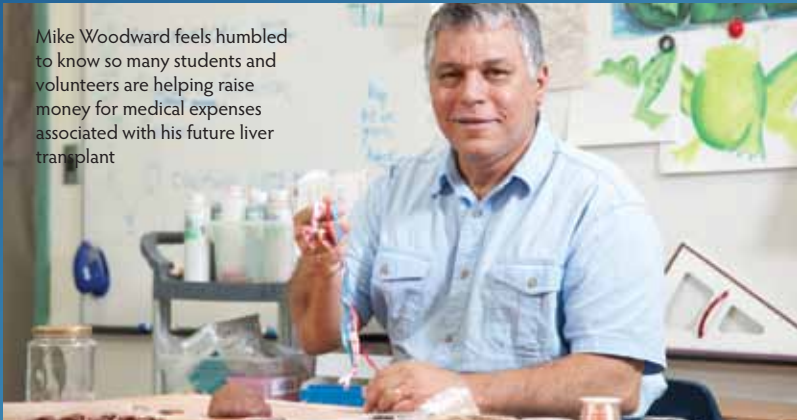
Creating a Project with Heart

With permission from their parents, many of those students became part of the Hearts for Health production team. For a while, they met every day to put their own special designs on hearts of every imaginable color. Conflicting schedules make the meetings less frequent now, but they haven’t lost their enthusiasm for the project.

Dr. Joe Graham, principal at MPJH, has enjoyed watching the project take hold on his campus. “Just a handful started, and they recruited their friends,” he recalls. “The students enjoy the camaraderie, the creativity, and what it’s going toward. They smile a lot when they talk about it.”



Katy students meet after school to make ceramic hearts for the Hearts for Health project



Mike Woodward feels humbled to know so many students and volunteers are helping raise money for medical expenses associated with his future liver transplant

Hayes Elementary art teacher Valerie O'Leary and Mike and Marcy Woodward



Students who volunteer for the program enjoy the chance to give back, while having fun being creative



Students have sold hearts to classmates, teachers, and neighbors and at local churches and shops

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Students spend many hours creating the ceramic pendants, with each showcasing a unique design

"The students enjoy the camaraderie, the creativity, and what it's going toward. They smile a lot when they talk about it."

- MPJH Principal Dr. Joe Graham about the Hearts for Health project

Last Christmas, gift buyers were given an opportunity to buy heart necklaces at an additional location when Marcy's friend, Mona Hart, offered a space by her hair salon for the Woodward's to display their wares. She also suggested replacing some of the ribbons with beaded strands. This one small change in the project helped double and even triple the value of the necklaces, depending on the kind of beads used. "It's all about community and helping," says Hart. "Besides, I thought they were so cute."

Looking Forward to a Healthy Future

All of the money that's coming in from the sale of the hearts is deposited in an account specifically set up for Woodward to help cover the costs of a transplant that are not paid by insurance. A nonprofit organization called HelpHopeLive, which is headquartered in Radnor, PA, manages the account, and all donations made are tax-deductible as permitted by law. There is no specific goal for the fund, but it will be ongoing until the transplant is accomplished.

Woodward is grateful for the heart these students, teachers, and community members have shown in his fight for health. He looks forward to receiving a liver transplant and the days that follow, when he can once again enjoy a normal, healthy life. When asked if he will go back to home building though, he pauses for thought. Finally, he shares, with a smile, "I think I'd like to have a pancake shop." KM

NOREEN STAVINOHA lives in Katy with her husband and miniature schnauzer and loves to tell the stories of interesting people.



Donate to the Woodward family by visiting helphopelive.org and entering "Mike Woodward" under "find a patient."

Join the organ donation registry in Texas by visiting donatelifetexas.org or ask about registration when renewing your driver's license.