

Saturday, September 25, 2004

Volunteer's books of thanks

Inspired by doctors, boy's project honors 9/11 victim's love of reading.

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The Orange County Register

Brant Whiting will tell you he's no more special than the other 40 kids receiving a CHOC Kids Service Award today at the Festival of Children.

Yet, he's the one that Children's Hospital of Orange County singled out to serve as grand marshal of the hospital's annual Walk in the Park fund-raiser at the Disneyland Resort in October.

The service project he started two years ago - Read All Over - has placed more than 70,000 gently worn books in the hands of needy children and first-time teachers, from his hometown of Fullerton to Afghanistan, from Compton to China.

Four years ago, Brant, 12, almost died.

His doctor told him he never should have made it, that he must be meant to do something special.

Read All Over started as a way to thank the people who saved his life.

By dedicating the project to one of the victims who died aboard United Airlines Flight 93 on Sept. 11, 2001, Brant grew the seed planted with his own near death into a pay-it-forward project that is a living legacy.

'SECOND CHANCE'

Brant had asthma all his life. It acted up every night. But this time when it woke him, the medication that his mom gave him didn't help.

Brant pulled away in a panic, gasping words Lisa Whiting can't forget.

"I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die."

He turned blue.

His dad, an orthopedic surgeon, started cardiopulmonary resuscitation. By the time paramedics arrived to take over, Brant needed more than CPR. A medical helicopter flew Brant to Children's Hospital in Orange, where doctors worked on him for nearly six hours.

"I had it in mind he was not going to make it," Lisa Whiting recalls.

A woman whose granddaughter was about to be removed from life support offered to pray for Brant. About 15 minutes later, doctors reported that Brant was still very critical but holding on.

He spent six days in a coma, on full life support. His recovery so amazed Dr. Nick Anas, director of CHOC's Pediatric Intensive Care Unit, that Anas showed him off to medical residents.

"I kind of felt like I'd been given a second chance in life," Brant says. "I should take the word of the doctor to try and do something special to repay them for what they did."

Just what that gesture would be nagged at him over the next two years, even as he went on with boyhood pursuits - playing baseball, learning to golf, taking up surfing.

Then, near the first anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks, Brant read about President George W. Bush calling upon youth to counter the acts of terror with acts of kindness. He took the challenge personally: "I'm 10, so I'm all, 'the president's telling me to do this, so I've *got* to do this."

Brant decided what to do one day as he sorted through books he no longer needed. He could donate them to less fortunate children. He could get other kids to do the same.

A book drive he planned at school took on added purpose when the principal of Hermosa Drive Elementary suggested he research the Points of Light Foundation's USA Initiative, an effort to do volunteer service as a tribute to someone who died in the Sept. 11 attacks.

But Brant didn't know any victims. Who could he honor? How could he find their family?

Brant found Deora Bodley when he happened to watch a televised U.S. Senate hearing for a class assignment on Sept. 10, 2002.

U.S.Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., spoke of Bodley, a college student who died aboard Flight 93 on her way back from visiting friends in New York. She was 20, a junior at Santa Clara University. Boxer talked about how Bodley read to schoolchildren every week.

Brant knew right away. "She's the one, mom," he said. "She's the one."

Brant reached Bodley's mother, Debby Borza, with help from a San Diego Tribune reporter who had written about the family.

Brant called and left a message. It was Sept. 13. Debby Borza was still back East with Deora's little sister, Murial Borza. They had attended a Sept. 11 memorial service at the crash site outside Shanksville, Pa.

Debby Borza called Brant as soon as they returned home.

Lisa Whiting, listening in on her son's phone call with Borza, recalls Borza's exact words: "Oh, my. This will keep my Deora alive forever."

HIGH COLLECTION GOAL

Within each book donated by Read All Over is a bookplate designed by Deora's sister, Murial Borza, 13, that bears a photo of Deora and words she wrote in a journal years ago when she was 11. It reads:

"People ask who, what, when, where, why, how. I ask peace."

At Bodley's old school in San Diego, La Jolla Country Day School, some 7,000 books were collected last year for Read All Over. Most went to create a library at Monarch School for homeless youth in downtown San Diego.

The rest can be found on the shiny new bookshelves in "Deora's Corner," a reading area inside the computer lab at the nearby Metro Region Juvenile Court and Community Schools building.

Debby Borza helped Brant turn Read All Over into a nonprofit organization and hopes to dedicate all her time to the project when she retires. The goal is to collect and distribute 1 million books.

"For me, there was just this huge void," Borza said. "I have a choice to try and fill that void with almost anything. This is a way, knowing that void will never be full, but loving every moment of it."

Brant says he'd like to enlist the aid of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

"I could see him being able to get all the schools to start doing Read All Over."

What Brant likes best about Read All Over is that it inspires kids to become what he calls "readers and leaders."

Cassie Moss, who lives in an Oregon town of 5,000, was already a reader, and had done service projects with Girl Scouts. But she became more of a leader when she gathered up about 2,000 books by posting fliers in town and placing collection boxes at her school.

She wants to donate them at Thanksgiving to a children's hospital near her home.

"I don't think people give a second thought about kids who want books," said Cassie, 11. "People think kids only want expensive games and toys, and kids just really want to read."