

Elementary schools in the Diocese of Trenton are certainly no strangers to works of service but, during the 2017-18 school year, the bounds of that service reached a whole new level. For a number of years, elementary schools in the Diocese have been participating in a Diocesan Day of Service, designed to reflect on God's call to serve others. In the past, each school identified, planned and executed a unique project. These individual projects were then broadcast on the school's social media and web page and press releases were sent to local media outlets. Although the Day of Service has always been successful, due to the model, with each school working on a unique project, its reach and impact were limited.

All that changed last year, when the decision was made to bring elementary schools together to focus on a single project. As a result of that collaboration, Hearts 2 Hospitals was conceived. The goal of this effort was to concentrate the resources of all our elementary schools for a common good and, in doing so; both maximize impact on the intended beneficiaries, and highlight the contributions of our Catholic school communities. Along with the inherent practice of service, a focus of this new direction included service learning, with students gaining a better understanding of the topic and/or people they were serving. Hearts 2 Hospitals is a project that involved elementary schools in the Diocese of Trenton are joining forces to help sick children and their families in hospitals in Burlington, Mercer, Monmouth and Ocean counties.

Eleven hospitals participated in the project and were the recipients of over 10,000 toys and over \$13,000 in gift cards collected by students in the Diocese. Each school approached the project in their own way and, as a result, all over the Diocese, students participated in educational, creative and spiritual activities designed to focus on helping hospitalized kids. Along with collecting donations, schools regularly prayed for sick children and families, encouraged contributions from co-sponsoring parishes, ran contests, created songs, listened to guest speakers in the medical field talk about childhood illness, read books, and researched disease – all at age appropriate levels.

The event culminated with a press conference held at the Diocese. During the press conference, Bishop O'Connell spoke about the value of service and praised the students for their efforts. Additionally, representatives from all hospitals were present and each spoke eloquently, yet at a level the students could understand, about the

importance of this project and, more importantly, its significance for the sick children and their families. One student representative from each school was present at the press conference and, because the press conference was live-streamed, many schools aired it for all their students. This step truly served to illustrate to all elementary students throughout the Diocese the importance of their effort.

All toys and gift cards were distributed to hospitals by student representatives from each of our schools. The hospitals graciously welcomed the students, providing tours, lunches, and the opportunity to meet various hospital officials – from CEOs to doctors, nurses, and other staff. Along with the publicity generated by each of our schools, the hospitals also included publicity in both their internal and external publications. In the case of Virtua, located in Burlington County, the project was not only mentioned in the Foundation report but also noted on their Foundation website, along with a link to our Catholic schools site.

Because of its great success, the decision has been made to continue Hearts 2 Hospitals in the upcoming school year. Each of the hospitals, impressed with both the participation by the students and the scope of the project, has promised a more active role, from providing tours to sending guest speakers to our schools. Hearts 2 Hospitals truly did everything it intended. It rallied students to perform wonderful acts of service. It created lasting community partners. It publicized, through social media, print media and various hospital publications the great work done by elementary students in the Diocese of Trenton. Most importantly, it helped those in need.