

Creve Coeur girl gives heart, cookies to hospice patients' families

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Samantha Shanker and her aunt, Marsha, have become co-workers as they assemble care packages for families in the BJC Healthcare pediatric hospice program.

Samantha Shanker is one of the most articulate and altruistic 12-year-olds you're likely to meet.

While most children her age are spending their summers texting friends and hanging out at the neighborhood pool, Samantha is making lists of corporate donors and brainstorming ideas for projects.

The intelligent and well-spoken Ladue girl is the youngest volunteer at BJC Hospice, where she and her aunt, Marsha Shanker, assemble and deliver care packages of cookies to families in the pediatric hospice program, called Wings.

Samantha and her aunt began the project last year when, instead of planning a party for their birthdays in March, they decided to bake cookies and deliver them to six hospice houses in the St. Louis area. The suggestion for helping the hospice program came from one of Marsha's co-workers.

"It made us feel very good because it made people happy," Samantha said. "It was nice to see how a basket of cookies could help them. We went to one family who had seven kids, and their youngest was sick. We made them two baskets."

When Samantha was looking for a project in anticipation of her bat mitzvah next March, she again decided to focus on the hospice program, this time filling bags with toiletries, toys and other small items for the families.

"Some kids just donate money, but the rabbi said it was better to donate your time, too," Samantha said.

Samantha and her aunt have enlisted the help of corporate donors, as well as Marsha's neighbors in Creve Coeur. Marsha has a drop box in her front yard where people often leave donations for the bags.

"Sometimes the neighbors leave notes saying how great this is, and that makes me feel good," Samantha said.

Samantha's aunt said her niece has a way with words when it comes to soliciting donors.

"Samantha is in charge of letter writing," Marsha said. "She has also contacted a lot of companies by phone, and they are amazed after they talk to her to learn she is only 12. It is interesting to see how people respond to requests from a 12-year-old versus if I asked them."

Samantha's mom, Wendy, said her daughter always has been mature for her age.

"Even when she was younger, she would ask about the things she saw," Wendy said. "She was very aware of the world around her."

Samantha said she just wants to bring a little comfort to families in difficult situations. She's hoping the attention she gets from this article will help inspire other youths to follow her lead. It's important to help others in their time of need, she said.

"Anything to let them know that you are thinking of them," Samantha said.

Want to help Samantha with donations?

E-mail her aunt at marsha.shanker@sbcglobal.net or send your donation to Hospice Patient Fund, Office of Development, BJC Hospice of St. Louis, P. O. Box 50403, St. Louis MO 63150.

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