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Woman rallies support for schools

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By Eloise Aguilar, ADVERTISER WINDWARD OAHU WRITER

Kathie Wells of Kailua is proving that one person can make a difference.

Two years ago, Wells, 56, got fed up with all the stories about the poor shape that Hawaii's public schools had fallen into because they were millions of dollars short of money needed for maintenance, repair projects, equipment and supplies.

Having sent her children to public school and volunteering for years, Wells knew the schools were doing some great things and that someone should do something to help them through the economic hardships.

"Then this little voice inside me said, 'Well, why don't you do something?'" she said.

She decided to ask schools and teachers for wish lists so she could buy weekly advertisements asking for donations to fulfill the needs.

In less than two years with the Community Helping Schools project, she has managed to arrange the donation of hundreds of used but usable items worth thousands of dollars to more than a dozen Windward Oahu schools.

She has managed to get musical instruments, furniture, office supplies, electronic equipment, appliances, sports equipment, puppets and even dirt. The response has been overwhelming.

"Every time I get a donation call, I'm like a kid at Christmas," Wells said. "I get so excited."

A full-time real-estate agent with Coldwell Banker, Wells spends \$384 a month of her own money to pay for the weekly ads. While other organizations such as the Marines, Army, Hawaii 3-Rs and Rotary Clubs have helped schools do cleanups and renovations, Wells is more interested in obtaining supplies and equipment.

She said she was able to take on the project because the real estate market was slow in September 2000 when she placed her first newspaper ad. Parent Community Networking Center coordinators at the schools are an integral part of the program, helping by picking up donations, Wells said.

Two months after the project began, she was diagnosed with cancer and had to stop working. She put the project on hold because of the effects of chemotherapy.

Wells spent most of 2001 recuperating, but in December she ventured out to a Honolulu Board of Realtors general meeting and trade show where she won a full-page ad in a newspaper.

"It was meant for real estate but I immediately thought this is a sign to get the program running again," Wells said.

So with improving health, growing school needs and the free full-page ad, Wells has renewed her efforts. Last week, she wrapped up a donation in which schools will share about 5,000 gallons of paint.

The paint, worth more than \$100,000, was donated by Hardware Hawaii, owned by Dave, Barry and Mary Lundquist of Kailua.

More than 20 Windward schools picked up gallons of paint to cover up graffiti and touch up classrooms, windows, ceilings and cafeterias. And in the case of Lanikai Elementary School, the paint will be used to touch up the entire campus.

"Without (Wells) we wouldn't have painted our school," said Pam Gillespie, a Lanikai parent who took the day off Thursday to pick up paint. Now with the help of Marines from K?neohe who will volunteer time to get the job done, the school hopes to finish the project in a couple of weeks.

More of the donated paint will be distributed to schools islandwide next week.

Pulling off donation after donation is rewarding but can also be tricky, Wells has found.

The paint donation nearly fell apart because there was no place to store the containers until they could be distributed. Wells had no idea the paint had to be carefully stored. Fortunately, she was able to find Kevin Andrews of Waim?nalo, who donated space in one of his warehouses.

The material also had to be separated by color, paint type and size. People from the Department of Education Windward District administrative support services and two paint specialists from Hardware Hawaii were among the 15 people who spent about 100 hours sorting and preparing for the distribution last week, said Cory DeJesus, support services manager.

Most of the paint was a base paint that required tinting. Hardware Hawaii included extra tints, a paint-can shaker and lessons on how to mix colors, said Dave Purington, vice president of the hardware stores in Kailua, K?neohe and Honolulu.

"There are many charitable organizations that could make use of this but we all know the conditions the schools are in, the department being strapped for money," Purington said, adding that it took nine months to arrange for DOE to take the paint and in the end Wells was able to resolve the storage problem.

Wells hopes to use the free ad in November, but first she wants to get more organized to avoid problems like she had with the paint.

While she has paid for all but a couple of the weekly ads out of her own pocket and the project has mostly benefited Windward schools, she'd like to expand it to the whole island.

"This program is taking off," she said. "But we really need more support, sponsors, office support, grant writing, and it would be super to have a Web site. Guess that's our wish list."

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Photo caption:

Kathie Wells, left, sorts through a load of donated paint with Cory DeJesus of the DOE Windward District and Dave Purington of Hardware Hawaii.

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Photo caption:

Kathie Wells had no idea where to store all of the paint donated by Hardware Hawaii - until Kevin Andrews, right, stepped up. Andrews donated warehouse space in Waim?nalo for the 5,000 gallons of paint.

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