

Lew-Port student holds fundraiser to help out Youngstown fire families

Second-grader's best friend among victims; sets \$4,000 goal to assist families

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Editor-in-Chief

On Tuesday, March 2, a fast-moving fire at a Village of Youngstown apartment complex resulted in significant damage to the building and displaced four families with children into the chilly winter night.

That tragedy also led to a show of support from the community for the affected families, including two GoFundMe accounts created by residents, and assistance from the Lewiston-Porter School District where children of the families attend classes.

That community support has continued to grow over past weeks.

For 8-year-old Serenity Pietrangeli of Lewiston, a second-grader at the Lewiston-Porter Primary Education Center, helping out a classmate has taken on a whole new meaning. You see, it turns out one of Serenity's best friends at Lew-Port was among the victims now without a permanent home.

"As soon as I heard that my friend's house burned down, I felt super-duper bad for her. I wanted to help her out some way, so I came up (with) an idea for bracelets,"

she said. "Me and my BFFI talked (about) trying to help my friend when I first came back to school. At first we were going to sell a whole bunch of stuff, but then (we decided), 'How about just bracelets' "

Serenity's mom, Jamie Ruperti, said, "She's doing this for all four families. She went in, she told her teacher she was going to make bracelets to help Natalie, her best friend. Her teacher thought it was a wonderful idea. So, her whole class started helping. And then spring break (came), so I recruited my mom to help out. We've spent a lot of weekends doing bracelets (laughs). We got a lot of them!"

An attractive display of bracelets with a special note to the community was the result. The message: "Please help donate to the 4 families who lost their homes to a fire!"

"A couple weeks ago, my 8-year-old daughter came home from school upset and determined. As she is telling me about her best friend's house fire she was gathering stuff to make bracelets.

"She said she needed to help. She wanted to sell bracelets and donate to her friend's family. She went to



Lew-Port second-grader Serenity Pietrangeli with Niagara County Legislator Irene Myers and her bracelet display at Lewiston's Village Bake Shoppe. A fundraiser is underway to assist Youngstown fire victims. (Photo by Terry Duffy)

school the next day and told her teacher about her donation plans and she was inspired, as were the rest of her classmates. They all began making bracelets.

"We recently found out there were three other families affected. She (Serenity) said it wouldn't be right to help 1 if they all needed help.

"All bracelets (sales) would be going to help all 4 families.

"Bracelets \$5, cash only. Please & thank you!"

Sales of the colorful, handcrafted bracelets soon caught on at the Lew-Port PEC, Serenity said.

"I think we're going to do other places too," she noted.

In the meantime, her mom, who works at the Village Bake Shoppe in Lewiston, teamed up with owner Michael Fiore to set up a display at the Center Street business, help build the interest, sell the bracelets and raise additional funds.

It worked.

A brief story aired on a Buffalo-area TV news station last month and sales took off. The earlier \$1,200 goal set to assist the four families has now grown to \$4,000, and interest continues to build in the community.

One of those impressed with the project is 1st District Niagara County Legislator Irene Myers.

"I was at home and going through my phone," she said. "I (saw) the little article that they had, in regards to the situation with the fire. It was Serenity's little friend. I then reached out to Jamie and said 'Geez, I'd like to help Serenity meet her goals.'"

A follow-up conversation she had with Serenity and her mom led to the family increasing their goal to \$4,000.

"They decided they were going to include all four families and try to get them \$1,000 each," Myers said.

She added, "They shared their goal with me. I said, 'Let's try to help.'"

Myers said she also wanted to get word out on "what a nice thing Serenity is doing ... her thoughtfulness and her kindness. So, I reached out to Rebecca Wydysz, my cohort in the legislature, and she had a great suggestion that we could possibly reach out to other businesses in the community, in the Town of Porter, in Ransomville, Youngstown and Lewiston. And then they can help Serenity to help these families in Youngstown.

"We would like to extend our community outreach. ... I'd like to reach out to the various businesses, not just Porter or Lewiston, but anybody in the county" who would like to help.

Of Serenity's project, Myers added, "She kind of captured my heart when I (saw that) she was only in the second grade. And what a nice thing she was doing, to help. It's nice to see kids, their thoughtfulness and kindness, to reach out to reach to a friend and help. Because ... you never know; it could happen to one of us, then we need some help. It was such a kind gesture."

At this writing, businesses and organizations from the River Region and western Niagara County are welcome to assist Serenity on her bracelet sales project to help out the Youngstown families affected by the fire. Ruperti invited the community to contact her at mommyserenity233@gmail.com to arrange for a special bracelet display and donation jar. She can also be reached at 716-289-2838. Ruperti said a PayPal account has been established with her email. A Venmo digital wallet link to donate is @serenitybracelet.

Ruperti said that, once the fundraising goal has been reached, she intends to hold a special event at the Village Bake Shoppe, where Serenity will present her donations of \$1,000 to each of the families.

"She wants to put it in a box (as a present) and hand it them," Ruperti said.

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