

Project Helping Hand gives grants directly to teachers in Monterey

Rotary gives directly to classrooms

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Violin music wafts through the hallways at Walter Colton Middle School. Kindergartners at Monte Vista School are learning how plants grow. A couple of classes at Foothill Elementary School got away from their desks for a while to attend a science camp in Yosemite National Park.

Years from now, after they have settled into their adult lives, today's schoolchildren are likely to remember those things more than any pop quiz they took, or essay they wrote, or multiplication table they once mastered. That is the theory of Greg Migdale, a teacher's son who three years ago created a project to help budget-strapped schools make a few dreams come true and hopefully inspire children to fall in love with education.

Project Helping Hand is an initiative of the Monterey Peninsula Sunrise Rotary Club, with a mission to create cash grants for Monterey Peninsula Unified School District teachers who need help funding a good educational idea.

For the past three years, Migdale and his fellow Sunrise Rotarians have doled out more than \$20,000 in grants to MPUSD schools to pay for such things as books, a microscope, a dance program, an accelerated reader program, art supplies, athletic equipment and field trips.

"Most of us, in the back of our heads, remember a teacher who made a difference in our lives way back when, and helped set our life paths by planting the seed for this idea or that one. My mom was one of those teachers," said Migdale, whose mother, Lorraine Gerstl taught third-graders at Santa Catalina School.

"I actually taught English for a year in Cambodia right after college, and it occurred to me then, about 20 years ago, what an amazing difference a little bit of money could make in education," he said.

The key, he decided, was to put the money directly into the hands of any teacher with a great idea that needed funding.

"My thought was that you could make a big difference and inspire a lot of children if you could put the money in the right place. The question, of course, was where is the right place?" he said. "The teachers, themselves, are best equipped to tell us where that place is. They know exactly where they need the money."

Migdale, a real estate appraiser, teamed with former Bayview Elementary School principal Jone Amador and MPUSD board member Elizabeth Panetta to design the program, then joined Sunrise Rotary expressly to pitch his concept and bring it to fruition.

Rotarians loved the idea and the simplicity of the process.

"Essentially, it's 'Ask me for the money and make sure your principal is in the loop and approves this as a legitimate request,'" Migdale said. "I'll take the request to our committee, which will evaluate the application and decide whether it's a good fit for the program. If it is, we write the check — simple as that."

Applicants must agree to total financial transparency, justifying every dollar in their request, using the grant entirely and exclusively for its expressed purpose and providing Sunrise Rotary with receipts for all expenditures.

The vast majority of applications have been approved.

Any public school in the Monterey district is eligible. Any idea will be considered. Jim Paoletti, instrumental music teacher at Walter Colton, applied for a grant to replace the 10- to 15-year-old strings on eight violins and one viola. Project Helping Hand covered the full cost — \$489.50 — and the result is a thriving program at the school.

"When a violin has good, quality strings, it plays easier, it feels good and it has a warmer tone," Paoletti said. "When our students played those instruments for the first time, their faces just lit up. It's like sliding behind the wheel of a Porsche after you've been driving a beat-up old car for years. There's no comparison."

Kindergarten students at Bay View Academy are eagerly awaiting delivery of a calendar rug (cost: \$300) that will help them learn math and days of the week. Project Helping Hand also has funded CDs (\$261.80) to help students read and computer upgrades (\$483.06) for third-graders.

"We're a start-up school, in our first year, so this is an opportunity for our teachers to fill a few holes that aren't in the regular budget," said John Favero, principal of the charter school. "Some of these supplemental things can allow you to provide a different shade of instruction and create opportunities that may not have been otherwise available to our students."

Migdale's grand vision is for his idea to catch on with other Rotary Clubs in California and the United States.

"Money doesn't make students smarter, but money can open your mind to education," he said. "When I'm 80, and today's 10- or 12-year-olds are all grown up and controlling the world, I really hope those people who are in charge of my life are well-educated. I want them to make good decisions on my behalf when I'm too old to make them for

myself. It's important to live in a community filled with educated, knowledgeable, excited people."

Donations and grants from individuals and organizations are welcome. Contact Migdale at 645-4744 or greg@montereycypressappraisal.com.

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