

SHELBY TWP.

Charity helps children with special needs

Clothes, toys, household items, money donations are now being accepted

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Shelby Township-based charity Jamie's Smiles is raising funds until January 2017 for adopted families of children with special needs through the Macomb Infant Preschool Program.

Jamie's Smiles is a fund created through the non-profit Shelby Community Foundation in memory of Jameson Bates, who was born with Down Syndrome and died from a seizure disorder in 2006. Jamie's parents, Mark and Gretchen Bates, created the "Jamie's Smiles" memorial and endowment funds to help other special needs children like their son and to raise awareness about the value of "special kids" in the community, according to a media release.

Mark and Gretchen Bates named the fund "Jamie's Smiles" to commemorate Jamie's beautiful smile. They believe that he can now smile every time a special needs child is helped because of his story.

Jamie's Smiles' mission is to supply funding to outstanding programs that benefit special needs children through grants and other financial means, according to the release.

The middle of January is when they're done with the final push for donations. Any donations after that date will be accepted.

The charity is currently accepting items such as clothing, coats, hats, gloves, shoes, boots, diapers, wipes, books, bedding, learning toys and food gift cards. Additional items needed include dishes, pans, pots, silverware and other kitchen-related items.

They try to supply a family with a couple of outfits, toys and books for the children, according to founder Gretchen Bates.

Used items cannot be accepted due to health reasons. A lot of the

children have suppressed immune systems, and used items could compromise some of the children, according to Bates.

This year, the charity is completely adopting two families, Eliana's family and Sloan's family.

"Eliana's Family" consists of the mother, Anna, age 26; father, Javier, age 30; Jeni, 10; Andres, 9; and Eliana, 1. All of the children have experienced some level of special needs, which required them to have more doctors' appointments than most children, and Anna has to stay home to give the children the attention they need. Their son, Andres, was tight in his muscles as a baby and a toddler, but is currently progressing well. Both Jeni and Andres are thriving. Eliana was born at 36 weeks and weighed 4 pounds, 12 ounces. Eliana also had delayed development, but she is currently progressing in the right direction. She requires her mom's full-time attention and care.

Javier is the only working person in the household. He is only able to bring home enough to get by with food, rent and bills. They often juggle between fixing the car and buying groceries. They hope to someday own their own home instead of renting.

"I feel blessed because of how close we are and the strong bond our family has," Anna said in a media release. "When it gets hard and it feels like the struggle will never end, we see the blessings in the most important things like us having each other, but it is hard sometimes to see that when you eat lentils for a week and wish I could offer my children more."

"Sloan's Family" is comprised of Monique, 38, and 16-month-old Sloan.

Monique was not able to go back to work immediately when she gave birth to Sloan. There weren't any day cares that would accept Sloan due to her feeding tube and all of her medical issues. She ended up losing her job.

Sloan was diagnosed with laryngomalacia malachia, which causes speech issues. According to the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia's website, "laryngomalacia malachia is a congenital softening of the tissues of the larynx (voice box) above



PHOTO COURTESY OF GRETCHEN BATES

Shelby Township-based charity Jamie's Smiles is raising funds for adopted families of children with special needs through the Macomb Infant Preschool Program. Shown here are Barb Bosel, MIPP occupational therapist (left); Gretchen Bates, Jamie's Smiles founder; and Catherine Joseph, MIPP special education teacher.

the vocal cords.(At birth) the laryngeal structure is malformed and floppy, causing the tissues to fall over the airway opening and partially block it."

Along with having laryngomalacia malachia, Sloan also has had five surgeries including one for her heart, one to repair a soft cleft palate, one for the larynx and two surgeries for Pierre robin sequence, where the tongue and jaw are smaller and the jaw does not come forward at birth causing breathing distress, according to a media release. As a result of breathing distress, she almost died. With all of this going on, Monique does not have any family.

Monique was able to find a job and returned to work this past fall since of the completion of Sloan's surgeries, making her more stable. Monique may have also found a day care that will be able to support her daughter's needs, since her feeding tube has been removed. Her car was totalled in poor weather conditions.

She was forced to buy a new car, which helped drain her savings. Her new car needs work and requires new tires before winter to make driving safer for her and Sloan.

She and Sloan have been staying with friends, who helped her get back on her feet and watched Sloan while she was at work. They asked her to find a new place. She found a place to move into in early November, but they are in need of pots, pans, dishes, silverware, furniture and other house-related items. She owns a bed.

Both adopted families are in need of winter coats, pajamas, winter clothing, shoes, socks, boots, hats, gloves, diapers and wipes, bedding and sheets, comforters, books and toys.

According to the charity's website, other families in need will also be provided with gift cards through MIPP and the community.

This year, Jamie's Smiles donated two \$1,000 grants to the Macomb Infant Preschool Program and Glen

H. Peters school, both in Macomb County. Combined, the schools have a total of more than a thousand students with special needs ages 3-26.

"Community should help community before government does," Bates said.

The grants go toward the purchases made on "core strength and stability enhancement devices, communication development products, fine and gross motor skills and sensory input enhancement items, seating devices and alternatives for posture development as well as learning toys, to be used on site at their locations and as short-term equipment for families to use for child development and in-home teaching," according to a media release.

Since the launch, the charity has given \$95,900. They currently have about \$117,000 in cash on hand to help those in need.

For more information on the charity or this event, visit jamiessmiles.org.