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Students learn character building in Alabama's Oak Mountain Elementary

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RAHKIA NANCE
News staff writer

When Sara Adamson was challenged to make a difference in her community, she found her inspiration in the trash.

The second-grader launched a neighborhood recycling program.

"It helps the environment and some people really don't have time to recycle," she said.

Taking a cue from her family's habits, she canvassed her neighborhood urging residents to recycle. If they would gather their recyclables, the second-grader would cart them to recycling bins. To sweeten the deal, she attached a bag and some candy to letters she delivered.

The Oak Mountain Elementary School student's project was prompted by the Character In Service program in which her school participates. The two-week program is designed to introduce second- and third-graders to the concept of character and how having good character can affect their homes, communities and the world. Sponsored by Make Way Partners Inc., a Birmingham-based nonprofit that assists victims of human trafficking, the program also introduces children to the plight of Sudanese orphans.

As part of the program at Oak Mountain, students learn about children in the Darfur region of Sudan, where Make Way Partners operates an orphanage. Many of the children are victims of human trafficking.

The Oak Mountain program ended Friday, but organizers said they hope the concepts stick with students throughout their lives.

"A lot of our kids have everything they want," said Hayden Belisle, a counselor at the school. "This gets them out of that bubble. It helps them realize that we are so blessed. And (they) think about being blessed instead of thinking about what we don't have or what we want."

Instead of hosting penny drives or soliciting monetary donations, children are challenged to create their own service



projects, said Whitney Terry, project coordinator for Make Way Partners. "We want them to understand that it's their character that's changing the world, not their money," she said.

The students earn "merit points" for acts of kindness, and a corporate sponsor donates money based on the number of merit points students earn. Oak Mountain's corporate sponsor is Neil's Pharmacy in Pelham.

The donated money supports Make Way Partners' Sudanese orphanage. Terry did not disclose the amount of the donation.

For two weeks, classes and individual students have started donation drives to animal shelters, made puppets for sick children and valentines for nursing home residents.

So far, Adamson has collected everything from brownie boxes to milk cartons and carted them all to the recycling bins at Heardmont Park.

"It made me feel like I was good and nice and a good person," she said of her project.

Make Way Partners began the Character In Service program last summer, and Phillips Academy in Birmingham was the first school to participate, Terry said. Oak Mountain is the first Shelby County school to participate.

The organization also plans to work with schools in Tarrant and Birmingham.

Email: rnance@bhamnews.com