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## Piscataway students spread holiday hope through program

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Julia's newly cut blond hair bounced, and she and a half dozen classmates skipped and sprinted through a hallway bearing stacks and stacks of neatly wrapped presents.

Earlier this week, 9-year-old Julia, a fourth-grader at Arbor Intermediate School, got a haircut and donated the 11 inches cut from her hair to Locks of Love, an organization that provides hair pieces to disadvantaged children. Yesterday, she and her classmates donated about 160 presents to the FISH Hospitality Program, a Dunellen-based rotating shelter for homeless women and families.

"I got a pair of sweat pants, jeans, a shirt and a beading kit," Julia said of her donation to FISH. "It's really good to think of the people we're helping."

Students, faculty and parents at Arbor have been donating holiday gifts to FISH for more than a decade. The gifts donated by Arbor, as well as other gifts donated by other area agencies and companies, will be given to current and former guests of the shelter at FISH's annual Christmas party, scheduled tonight.

FISH's treasurer, Dave Walter, and its president, Bob Spencer, drove a FISH truck yesterday afternoon to the school to pick up the toys. Spencer said many of the people served by FISH have jobs that don't pay enough to cover their bills.

"Half of the guests that we have are employed, but it's hard to keep up with the rent if you have a couple of kids," he said.

Walter said many of the children served by the program would not have Christmas presents if not for the donation program.

Principal Susan Chalfin said the school also held a country sale — comprised of donated new and used gifts and some baked goods — that raised \$1,500 for FISH. Chalfin said children are always eager to get their parents' permission to participate in the gift drive.

"It's one of the few letters that gets home and gets back to us," she said.

Rosenthal gave participating students a paper ornament with the name of a child in need, the child's age and a desired gift. The child and/or his or her parents then buy the present or presents and bring it back to the school wrapped.

School Counselor Robyn Rosenthal said faculty also participate, and many families buy multiple gifts. Initially, Rosenthal had 90 ornaments to distribute. She said she had to ask for another 90 due to the heavy response.

"It teaches them there are people that are less fortunate, and it's a time to reach out," Rosenthal said.

George 10, a fifth-grader, said helping those in need is rewarding.

"I just like helping people. It's just really fun," he said. "My most favorite part is it takes me out of my school class for just a tiny bit."