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Stafford Springs Student Forms Charity To Pay Heating Bills



Anna Murphy, 13, of Stafford Springs, created a charity that raises money for families who can't afford heating bills. (Cloe Poisson / Hartford Courant)

By MEAGHAN LATELLA

Anna Murphy remembers being cold sometimes in the winter and has a charity now that helps other families

During Connecticut's historically harsh winters, when most residents are snug inside their heated homes, it's easy to forget that not everyone is comfortable.

"My family and I always struggled with paying the bill for oil when I was little," said Anna Murphy, 13, of Stafford Springs. "I didn't like how we suffered; I didn't want other people to suffer, so I wanted to help them."

At age 9, Anna was concerned for others who experienced what she had gone through. Her concern soon turned into something tangible — a charity called Warming Families Makes Cents.

Anna decided that she would collect loose change and then use whatever she raised to help struggling families heat their homes. She started by enlisting the help of her fourth-grade classmates and her teachers.

"I got my class together and my whole class did chores at home and we put it all in a piggy bank," Anna said.

That was in 2011. Festis Equipment and Oil matched what Anna and her classmates raised. In just a couple of months, Anna's fundraising efforts totaled \$1,000. Anna is now about to enter eighth grade. In the four years since Warming Families first began, the charity has grown substantially.

"The next step was reaching out to local businesses and putting out [collection] jars," Anna said.

Right now, Anna has collection jars out at Aubuchon Hardware and the Stafford Thrift Store. She said that as winter approaches, more jars will be placed at more locations. In the past, collection jars have been placed at Dave's Pet City, Freidrich Jewelers, Subway, Workers Federal Credit Union, Basil's Restaurant, Stafford Savings Bank, Stafford Academy of Dance, Festis Oil Service and Artisan's Corner Gifts.

In the past four years, Warming Families has raised nearly \$20,000. Anna partners with Festis Equipment and Oil. She said that the company and the town keep a list of families that do not qualify for oil assistance from the state. They then refer these families to Anna.

"She has also had several families reach out to her on Facebook," said Becky Murphy, Anna's mother.

In addition to providing families with oil, Anna has also helped heat homes that use wood pellets, gas and electricity.

As the charity grows, Anna said she is always looking for new ways to raise money. Last year, she held a 5K race and all of the proceeds were donated to Warming Families. The second annual race will take place on Nov. 14. Right now, Anna only helps families from Stafford, but she soon hopes to expand her efforts into neighboring towns, specifically Willington.

In addition to being named a Courant Hometown Hero, Anna has already been recognized for being a leader in her community. Last year, she won a national award. She was one of 25 kids aged 8 to 18 nationwide to receive the Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, based in Colorado. According to the award's website, recipients "have made a significant positive difference to people and our environment."

"I didn't know that this could lead into winning awards," Anna said of her charity.

Anna is part of the student council at her middle school. In her free time, she volunteers at Willington Hills Equestrian Center, where she rides horses. She also loves to play soccer, and she said she hopes to play at the Division I level someday.

Her mother said that she could not be prouder of her daughter's accomplishments.

"Anna has an old soul," Becky Murphy said. "She's always loved helping people. ... I think [Warming Families] has really shaped her and given her confidence."

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