

JoJo's Hug Project



PHOTO BY MATT SHUCK PHOTOGRAPHY.

JoJo high-fives ER nurse Ty while Gary Weinstein, CEO of Washington Health System, looks on.

Local 9-year-old delivers hugs, one stuffed animal at a time.

BY JEN BROZAK

JoJo Jaskulski may only be 9 years old, but she's already making a huge impact on her community at large.

Last July, motivated by the Disney "Be Inspired" program, which encourages young people to make a difference in the world, the Canonsburg third grader launched "JoJo's Hug Project." The project focuses on collecting stuffed animals to donate to children who are facing stressful situations, such as at local police or fire stations or in the emergency room.

Since she began her project, JoJo estimates that she's collected and purchased approximately 100 brand-new stuffed animals, Beanie Boos and Squishmallows for local children. On Dec. 17, she donated a large number of those toys to the Washington Health System Emergency Department.

JoJo compares herself to the character Olaf from the Disney film "Frozen," because he likes to give warm hugs. "I want to spread kindness everywhere and really just want to give kids who are scared hugs to bring them comfort," she says.



JoJo and Kay Jo Fischer, Assistant Manager of the WHS Emergency Department, on their way to hand out stuffed animals to the kids in the ER.

In addition to donating toys to the WHS Emergency Department, JoJo has collected and donated new stuffed animals to local police and fire stations, including the North Strabane police and fire departments, the Chartiers Police Department and the Peters Fire Department. She also donates any gently used stuffed animals she collects to the Canonsburg/Houston Food Pantry.

In addition to accepting donations, JoJo raises money to purchase stuffed animals by making and selling crafts. She also raises money an old-fashioned way: by selling lemonade.

JoJo's mother, Melanie Jaskulski, is not surprised by her daughter's generosity and compassion for others. She says that as a family, she and her husband Henry have always tried to instill kindness in their daughter—in the past, JoJo has donated 12 inches of hair to Wigs for Kids, volunteered to cook holiday meals at Ronald McDonald House, and competes in an annual "kick-a-thon" to help families in need receive Thanksgiving turkeys. Prior to her Hug Project, JoJo conducted a gluten-free food drive to ensure that families who use the local food bank have access to safe, gluten-free foods.

"We introduced her to helping others, and she found joy in doing so and wanted to ensure she continued," says Jaskulski. "One day, she asked me if we could look into a new project to help more kids, and asked to look at the Disney 'Be Inspired' website. I wasn't surprised, but am proud of her for taking on what she really wanted to do and making it her own. She truly is one genuine, kind-hearted girl."

When she's not working on her project, JoJo takes tae kwon do, plays basketball and likes to build Legos, and she names math and science as two of her favorite subjects.



JoJo meets police officers for her first-ever dropoff of stuffed animals.

Her ultimate goal? "I want to help give hugs to as many kids as I can," JoJo says.

For more information or to donate to JoJo's Hug Project, visit JoJo's Hug Project on Facebook or send an email to jojohugproject@gmail.com. ■