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Area sisters work together to operate their own nonprofit organization, which they dedicate to helping those in need.



Helpful Hearts

by Gail Kretchmer, for
The Bulletin Special Projects

An 11-year-old girl lies in a hospital bed for three days, recovering from back surgery. There is some pain, and she has trouble moving.

Her family members are the only ones who can understand the words she speaks.

But she is not whining or feeling sorry for herself. Instead, she feels like she's on top of the world.

Brittany Peterson, now 15,

reflects on that time in her life. She had received dozens of cards from people she didn't even know when she was hospitalized, and this outpouring of support made such an impact on her that she decided to dedicate herself to helping others in need.

So she and her sisters, Madeleine and Eliza (now 12 and 7, respectively) started an organization called Helpful Hearts.

"I really wanted to help people," Brittany said. "A lot of people don't have opportunities, and I have the resources to help others. I just want to help; I don't expect anyone to help me in return."

While this attitude of altruistic giving would be noble for any teen, it is particularly noteworthy coming from Brittany because she herself has been in need of help all her life. Brittany has cerebral palsy.

United Cerebral Palsy of Oregon and

Fifteen-year-old Brittany Peterson (right), along with her sisters Madeleine (12) and Eliza (7), started Helpful Hearts, a nonprofit that allows them to assist those in need. Photos by Nicole Werner.





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Southwest Washington defines cerebral palsy as a group of neurological disorders that affect communication between the brain and the muscles. In Brittany’s case, this means spending her days in a wheelchair and relying on her parents to translate her words for others.

What it doesn’t mean is a life without purpose, as evidenced by Helpful Hearts and the good work she’s accomplished through her organization.

Brittany and her sisters started by creating confetti bags, crocheting coasters and designing handmade greeting cards. The younger girls went door-to-door selling their products, successfully making the sale 60 to 70 percent of the time.

“And if they said no,” Madeline said, “we offered them our brochure.”

Proceeds from the first sales project were used to provide 29

sleeping bags for the homeless. A Bible was placed in the bottom of each bag.

“It felt really good,” Eliza said. “If somebody’s having a hard time, I want to help them to make their day feel better so they can have a better life.”

After that project, their father,

HELPFUL HEARTS



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Mike, applied for nonprofit status, and Brittany created a website.

Since the inception of Helpful Hearts, the Peterson girls have raised thousands of dollars for a Mexican orphanage, gift boxes for troops overseas, and



Through Helpful Hearts, the Peterson sisters have mailed care packages to soldiers, raised money to buy books for area shelters, and provided sleeping bags and Bibles for the homeless. Photos submitted.

the purchase hundreds of books that they donated to shelters for children, women and families.

They have also integrated their activities into home school projects and have sought non-cash donations as well. For example, they sent letters to the governor of each of the 50 states as part of a geography unit, requesting that each state leader send his or her favorite book for donation. They have also solicited local businesses and school supply organizations for assistance.

So far, the focus has been primarily military and literary.

"We didn't plan it, but that's what it is turning out to be," Brittany said. "And I love it."

The girls are currently developing a plan to partner with Central Oregon Veterans' Outreach to help homeless veterans in honor of their recently deceased grandfather, and they are planning to send letters to their favorite authors for more book donations.

"All kids deserve to read," Brittany said.

Locally, Helpful Hearts has donated a hundred books to Saving Grace, which provides support to survivors of domestic

violence in Central Oregon.

Paula Little, development director for Saving Grace, said the donated books are important in helping families feel comfortable and helping children in the shelter take their minds off difficult subjects.

"We were very impressed with Brittany," Little said. "It's amazing how much joy she can provide."

And to some, it's also amazing how much energy she has.

According to her father, Brittany wakes at 5 a.m. every day with myriad new ideas for Helpful Hearts projects, from

raising funds for vaccinating homeless animals to helping others in greater need than she.

Her ultimate dream is to raise funds for cerebral palsy.

"Not a lot of people I meet with cerebral palsy are the same age as me; most are Eliza's age and can't talk," Brittany said. "But you can see they're totally happy, clicking along. It would be great to raise money for a college scholarship for a kid like me. It would be just the coolest thing in the world."

For more information about Helpful Hearts, visit www.helpfulhearts.org.

central oregon Women's EXPO

October 22-23, 2010



The Women's Expo will bring together a wonderful and dynamic community of women to explore, share, educate and enhance the Central Oregon lifestyle.

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