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Boys learn meaning of philanthropy

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LAWRENCE — It was the first time Alex Thu had ever written a check, but he got used to it.

The fifth-grader at Bellesini Academy is a member of the Philanthropy Club at the all-boys middle school. The club aims to give the boys a taste of what it might feel like to be benefactors to those in need.

"I was a little nervous," said Alex, who on Wednesday wrote out oversized symbolic checks for \$2,500 each, which will be presented along with real checks to Ground Works Lawrence, Lazarus House, the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the Music Club House Program at the YMCA.

In this case the \$10,000 is coming from the Highland Street Foundation, but it was the boys who decided who would get the donations. The foundation has financially supported Bellesini Academy since the school opened nine years ago.

Heather Jack of the Volunteer Family Foundation worked with the Highland Street Foundation in developing the club's curriculum.

For students like Josiel Aponte, 11, being part of the Philanthropy Club was an eye-opener. Club members visited the Good Shepherd Center of Lazarus House, which serves free meals to the needy.

"It changed my life knowing that I can make a difference by giving groups money so they can help other people," said Josiel, a fifth-grader.



Ann Hermes/Staff photo David Bickel, director of The Music Club House program at the Lawrence YMCA, thanks Bellesini Academy students after being presented with a \$2,500 grant through the Highland Street Foundation.



Ann Hermes/Staff photo From left, Bellesini Academy students Ivan Perez, 13, Wilbert Garcia, 11, and Alex Thu, 13, fill in an oversized check to present to Lazarus House, Groundworks Lawrence, MSPCA and the Music Club House program at the YMCA, as part of a grant through the Highland Street Foundation.

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Tuong Thai, 13, said the club is helping him develop leadership skills.

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In addition to Josiel, Alex and Tuong, students participating were Eric Encarnacion, Anthony Abarca, Wilbur Garcia, Paul Lopez, Ivan Perez, Bradley Camilo and his brother Moises Camilo, and Billy Thu.

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Kaitlin Rogato, director of enrichment programs at Bellesini and the club's supervisor, said the boys met after school once a week.

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They did research on 12 local nonprofit organizations, visited some of them, kept a journal and did homework on what philanthropy means, what the local needs are, and how philanthropic foundations operate.

After their research, the boys voted to determine which programs to help.

"The most important thing was knowing that they have a voice and a choice in the matter," Rogato said. "It taught them that students of any age have a choice."

Rogato said visiting the Good Shepherd Center impacted the boys the most.

"As soon as they got in they were taken aback," she said. Then Bridget Shaheen, executive director of Lazarus House, told them she saw the face of Jesus on everyone who came through the doors.

"That really stuck with them," Rogato said.

Jen Dussault of the MSPCA, said the grant will be used to pay for transportation for its after-school program and for summer school scholarships.

"For them to do an educational program at the MSPCA is huge because in a few years they will be acquiring an animal of their own," Dussault said

David Bickel of the Music Club House at YMCA of Merrimack Valley in Lawrence, said the grant will be used for general operating cost.

"I feel very honored that they chose us," Bickel said. "It's nice to be recognized by kids we work with because they know us and trust us." Between 12 to 15 Bellesini students go to the music club on Fridays.

The Highland Street Foundation established in 1989 by the late David J. McGrath Jr., founder and owner of TAD Resources International, Inc. After his death in 1995, the company was sold in 1997, and the foundation received the majority of its current endowment. McGrath's widow, JoAnn, and their five children make up the Highland Street Foundation board.

Bellesini Academy is a private, tuition-free Catholic school established by Merrimack College and dedicated to providing an education to boys from limited financial means living in Lawrence and preparing them to succeed at competitive secondary schools and colleges.