

A Clovis friend's tragedy leads to 1,300 pajamas for donation

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The Fresno Bee

March 9, 2014



Kylene Hashimoto, 17, a senior at Clovis High School, sits on a collection of over 400 pajamas at her home in Clovis, Calif on Friday, March 7, 2014. Kylene is one of four finalists nationwide for her work collecting pajamas for children who have been displaced from their homes.

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It all started with a friendship. One little girl, looking out for her best friend.

After a deadly fire in Clovis claimed the lives of two teenage sisters and their 22-year-old uncle in 2006, 9-year-old Kylene Hashimoto wanted to help.

And that desire to help would inspire her to start a community service project that one day would win national recognition.

Kylene's best friend, Christy Yang, also 9, had just lost three members of her family and her home.

As Christy's parents grieved and adjusted, Christy and three of her young siblings moved in with Kylene's family in Clovis for four months to finish their school year.

Bags and boxes of donations poured in for the Yang children, but Kylene noticed one crucial garment missing: There were no pajamas.

It concerned Kylene, who loved the feeling of slipping into her pajamas after school, right after a hot shower. Pj's represented home and comfort.

The lack of pj's for the Yongs prompted Kylene to create the Kyndness4Kidz Project in 2008.

Since then, she has collected more than 1,300 pajamas for children who have been displaced from their homes.

Last week, Kylene's giving nature was honored by the Heart of America Foundation when she was named one of four finalists for the Christopher Reeve Award for Outstanding Community Service. She was chosen from more than 200 nominations.

Kylene and Christy, now both 17, lost touch for years but found each other again about a year ago through Facebook. It was a tearful reunion. Christy learned Kylene had been collecting pajamas for years in her honor.

"I'm just thankful that somebody cares so much," Christy said of Kylene's pajama project. "Words can't describe it. They still think about us that much, that they are going to start something this big. ... It was a good feeling that they still had something to do with us."

The Christopher Reeve Award was started in 2002 to recognize outstanding youths in honor of the actor who was paralyzed in an equestrian competition and went on to lead a life of community service before his death in 2004.

This year's award winner is Nicholas Cobb, an Eagle Scout from Texas who was honored for helping the homeless.

Kylene holds her annual pajama drives from Thanksgiving to Valentine's Day. This year, more than 400 pajamas were collected and will be donated soon to Court Appointed Special Advocates, which helps foster youths in the region, and the Marjaree Mason Center, which provides shelter for victims of domestic abuse throughout Fresno County.

Kylene, who started her pajama project as a middle schooler, also was inspired by her cousin who collects toothpaste and toothbrushes for the homeless. She wanted to collect something for others, too.

"I'd like to inspire people," Kylene said. "People might forget what you say, but they'll always remember how you made them feel."

Christy said Kylene always has a smile, and that her friend is outgoing and fun.

But Kylene has had her own share of hardship. As a freshman, she was broadsided in Clovis by a driver who ran a red light. The accident left her with a traumatic brain injury.

She recovered quickly and was back in school within three months, but her new life was different. For months she had to read textbooks in extra-large print due to vision problems, and the lifelong athlete no longer could play sports.

But Kylene remained determined and hard-working. Today, the college-bound senior at Clovis High School is a cheerleader with a 4.0 GPA, with plans of going into public relations.

She also likes to gather up friends to volunteer at events, especially basketball games and fundraiser races such as the March of Dimes, which raises money for research and programs to end premature birth, birth defects and infant mortality.

"Being a Christian, I believe that God saved me for a reason," Kylene said of her car accident, as tears rolled down her cheeks. "I just feel like, I wasn't just put on the earth for myself."

Kylene's mother, Wilma Hashimoto, said her daughter is goal-oriented, reflective and "bold," with a lot of conviction.

This is Kylene's last year leading the pajama project. After she graduates from high school this summer, she is passing it on to a Girl Scout. But her community service will continue. She said she hopes to start another service project that is even bigger.

Wilma Hashimoto said her daughter's community service honor is wonderful, but there is something even more special:

"It's more about two friends that just loved each other so much, and to this day I think they are better people for it," she said tearfully. "And you don't know what is in store for them in the future, but that friendship, that one event, really changed their life."

"I'm just thankful that somebody cares so much. Words can't describe it." — Christy Yang

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