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For Modern Kids, 'Philanthropy' Is No Grown-Up Word

By *Philip Rucker*
Washington Post Staff Writer
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In lieu of presents at her 12th birthday party this year, Maddie Freed of Potomac asked her friends to bring money, and she raised \$800 for Children's Hospital.

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Eight-year-old Jenny Hoekman saves a third of what she makes walking dogs, and this month the Takoma Park girl donated it to help her Brownie troop sponsor an immigrant family.

And in Club Penguin, a popular online game club for the elementary school set, more than 2.5 million kids gave their virtual earnings to charities in a contest this month. In response, the site's founders are giving \$1 million to charities based on the children's preferences.

Young children and teenagers across the nation are getting involved in philanthropy more than ever, according to research and nonprofit experts, who credit new technologies with the rise of the trend. As young people increasingly become exposed to and connected with the problems of the world via the Internet and television, experts said, parents are finding new ways to instill in their children the value of giving.

At the same time, technology is democratizing philanthropy so giving is not only easier for people of all ages and means, but also trendier. And children are starting to organize at the grass-roots level to give.

"We've globalized technology, we've globalized commerce, but we haven't globalized compassion," said Craig Kielburger, founder of Free the Children, a nonprofit network of kids helping kids. "But we're seeing a generation of kids, ages 10 to 15, who are aware of global problems, and they're really searching to help.

"The next step is to help kids move from that awareness to action."

At Club Penguin, children's penguins have virtual jobs, earn virtual coins and can buy things for their virtual igloo homes. The site held a 10-day "Coins for Change" campaign ending on Christmas Eve in which 2.5 million users donated in some cases as many as 1,500 coins -- enough to furnish an igloo -- to charities. In turn, the site, owned by Walt Disney Co., divided 1 million real dollars among the charities: the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation, the World Wildlife Fund and Free the Children.

Lane Merrifield, the site's co-founder, said teaching kids about philanthropy is "part of our responsibility.

"We don't live in a world that is just about playing games or going to work and earning coins and buying stuff. There's also giving back."

Eileen Barber, 10, of Charlottesville said she gave her Club Penguin coins to the World Wildlife Fund to help animals. "It sort of seemed like they have a lot more needs than us," Barber said. "With global warming and stuff, I figured it would be nicer to look beyond just myself."

Her mother, Tiffany Barber, said it is important for her kids to learn "that not everybody lives in a four-bedroom house and has two cars and all the food they want."

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This holiday season, thousands of parents gave their kids "give cards," sold through philanthropy sites such as GlobalGiving.com. Like gift certificates, the cards enable people to go to an online marketplace and find a charity to make a donation.

Also popular among youth are "embedded" gifts: items such as T-shirts, scarves or cellphones that have a charitable donation built into the price. A prominent example of this trend is the (Product) RED campaign at such retail outlets as Gap and Apple. Spearheaded by U2 lead singer Bono, the campaign raises money to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.

Established foundations and nonprofit groups, including many in the Washington region, are engaging children and teens in new ways. For the first time, the Olney-based Carl M. Freeman Foundation included two teenagers this year on its grant-making board, which decides which projects to fund.

The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region began a youth philanthropy program about five years ago in local jurisdictions. The program makes some of the foundation's money available to a board made up exclusively of students who study needs among disadvantaged youth in their counties, and the students then award grants to certain projects.

"What's magical about the program is that young people usually don't have the opportunity to make decisions and have that kind of power," said Silvana Straw, senior program officer at the Community Foundation.

Some groups make youth philanthropy a primary mission. New Global Citizens, a national nonprofit group based in San Francisco, mobilizes high school students to tackle such global issues as poverty, child labor and disease by raising money for vetted projects.

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Nicole Sanchez, co-founder of the group, said young people today are more engaged than prior generations largely because of technology.

"Now they could have friends on Facebook who are in the middle of these things," Sanchez said. "They're hearing stories firsthand about the Darfur genocide or about the mudslides in Indonesia. Most young people's immediate reaction is, 'What can I do to help?' and 'What do you need from me?'"

Sanchez said philanthropy once conjured up images of "very wealthy people in ball gowns at the opera. Those are *philanthropists*. But what we're trying to do is demonstrate that anybody can be a philanthropist and have an impact."

The scale of money children are raising through new technologies or giving away through charities is "mind-boggling," said Lucy Bernholz, founder and president of Blueprint Research and Design, a leading consulting firm for nonprofit organizations.

"It used to be the pennies we raised through UNICEF boxes, and now you're talking about 15- and 17-year-old children who are savvy enough and committed enough to raise tens of thousands of dollars and sending it halfway around the world," Bernholz said.

Research suggests that affluent families increasingly are including their children in philanthropic decisions.

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A recent study by Bank of America and the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University found that involving children and grandchildren in philanthropy is a top priority for "dynasty" households, in which fortunes are passed through generations.

The Montgomery County Community Foundation, which handles philanthropy for many wealthy families, has seen an uptick in parents directing grants based on their children's interests.

"We're definitely seeing that more and more," Sally Rudney, the foundation's executive director, said. "Often their interests are coming out of their community service or through their faith community."

Nonprofit sector leaders say the newfound focus on giving among youth might be a natural extension of the increasing attention paid in recent years to community service, at corporations and universities and among high school students seeking admission to competitive colleges.

"I think what it might be is a trickle down of graduate school education, the business schools, where there's really been a huge explosion of adding socially geared programs and courses into business school curriculum," Bernholz said.

As a student at Sidwell Friends School, Joanna Sharpless of Chevy Chase sat on the youth philanthropy board for Montgomery. She said the experience of awarding grants to programs helping youth in her county was transforming and helped her realize the potent power of philanthropy.

"It was a very eye-opening experience in terms of just being able to see the real problems that

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kids my age were dealing with in communities that were so close to me and yet seemed so far away," said Sharpless, 19.

Sharpless wrote about it in her college admissions essay for Brown University, where she is now a sophomore in the pre-med program.

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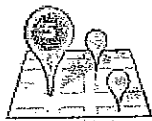
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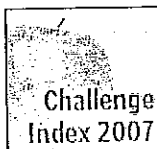
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