

Treats without the tricks

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It began in one girl's closet with Hannah Montana, a diva and a bumblebee.

On Halloween local trick-or-treaters sported those costumes and a couple of thousand more that were collected everywhere from Elmwood Park Zoo, to the Upper Main Line YMCA.

Emma Rose Shapiro was looking through her closet last fall when she found a bunch of old Halloween and dance recital costumes she'd outgrown. Shapiro, now 12, said she knew she'd never wear them again.

"I figured there must be kids who may not be able to afford a Halloween costume every year, or maybe even once in their lifetime," she said.

"I talked to my mom about it, and she sort of challenged me to think of an idea of how I could help these kids, and then this idea came to life."

And so The Halloween Helpers (www.thehalloweenhelpers.com) was born. It's a program geared to gather gently-used Halloween costumes and donate them to children who might otherwise be left out of this annual dress-up day.

The Wynnewood girl, a seventh-grader at Bala Cynwyd Middle School who plays soccer, violin and machine sews when she's not doing homework, said from her closet the idea grew bigger than she could have ever imagined.

From her costumes she added her friends' costumes, and then her neighbors' costumes. "Then we started putting collection boxes around the area, and people who I don't know put a bunch of costumes in the collection boxes and we got over 2,000 costumes," she said.

Since last spring collection boxes took up residence in schools, churches, synagogues and businesses and with Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops and other organizations.

"To tell you the truth, when I just thought of the idea I didn't think it was actually gonna progress and turn into something very big in the Norristown area," Shapiro said.

The impact of her idea was made clear the week before Halloween during a two-day costume distribution held at the Greater Norristown Police Athletic League, which her mother, Ilyse coordinated.

"There were a bunch of kids there who probably wouldn't be able to get a costume every year," Shapiro said. "When we were distributing the costumes there were families with a large number of kids, and maybe the parents couldn't afford a Halloween costume for each kid."

She assumed the recipients were all from Norristown, "but even if they weren't, it doesn't matter," she said. "They came and (were there) for a costume."

The main event was a success. After months of collecting costumes, all but 150 went home with kids excited to dress as cartoon superheroes, princesses and spooky characters — it was all there.

Because garments came in from a mass collection, Shapiro said there were many "interesting costumes," her favorite being a "big, pink fluff ball with a beak" — a flamingo.

The extras, Shapiro said, were donated to homeless shelters and other organizations her mother and P.A.L. volunteers sought out. She'll begin collecting again in the winter or spring for Halloween 2010, and collection sites will be posted on the Web site.

This Halloween Shapiro dressed as the Scarecrow from "The Wizard of Oz," along with friends Dorothy, the Lion and the Tin Man.

"I love it that for one night you can just pretend to be someone else," she said. And so at P.A.L., "I felt really good because I saw that all of these kids had these smiles on their faces, and they were so happy to be able to choose the costume (they) wanted.

"I talked to a bunch of the kids because I was their personal shopper and helped the kids decide what costume they wanted," she said.

A few of her friends went to P.A.L. to lend a hand, but most volunteers, she said, were people who'd heard about Halloween Helpers "through their kids' schools or saw a flyer somewhere. And on the second night 30 people from Cabrini College came and helped out."

Knowing she's only 12 and has inspired not only others her age, but also college students and even some people twice her age to volunteer doesn't really faze Shapiro much — because she's only 12.

"It's always great for everyone to think of community service projects because you're helping other people, and when you help other people good things happen to you," she explained.

"I've done community service for a while, but (before) it wasn't really my idea; it was more like organized events that I just participated in."

As Halloween Helpers materialized in the past year, community service has taken on new meaning for Shapiro, who's now created a project from scratch.

"I hope it continues because of the results this year," she said. "I can only imagine how many people will come next year and get our costumes."