

American Fork students hug bears before donating them



Students at American Heritage Academy celebrated 10 years of hugging teddy bears last Friday. As a service project for the Ogden Rescue Mission, students at American Heritage are encouraged to raise money to buy a teddy bear to donate to the mission.

The mission is a privately funded organization that receives no government funding. It has remained independent so that it can encourage prayer, scripture study and other religious

observances. Because it receives no government funding, the mission was not able to raise enough money to give a toy to the children who came through.

Lauri Updike, a teacher at American Heritage Academy, heard of the mission's need at a conference and began gathering teddy bears for them.

"We take them to the Ogden Rescue Mission where they will be given, one at a time, to children who need something warm and soft to hug," Updike said.

Updike compared the two meanings of the word "bear," and indicated that they are using the bears to help others bear their burdens. "American Heritage puts those two definitions together," Updike said. "We collect the four-legged bears and give them to support those who don't have a home."

"The needy and sometimes homeless children that come through the mission leave comforted by this gift," said vice-principal Leland Anderson.

On the last day of school before Christmas break, students and teachers formed a few assembly lines through the halls of the school. Each teddy bear was passed through a line, receiving a hug from each student. "Each bear is hugged not by one student, but by dozens, scores or even hundreds of students," Anderson said.

Anna Griffith is a second-grader at American Heritage Academy and an expert teddy bear hugger.

"We're giving them to homeless children," she said. "They will feel nice and comforted because they are feeling love from children."

This was fourth-grader Caleb Buhel's third year participating the teddy bear hug.

"I enjoy it because it's fun and I like hugging them because they're soft," he said.

Students are encouraged to earn their own money to go buy a bear so that they will feel more ownership with the project.

"Our kids work to earn the money to buy their teddy bear," parent Francisca Handy said. "They give of their time and their money to do this."

Griffith earned money to buy her donated bear and went to the store to pick it out.

"It was a little blue bear. I really thought that a little girl would like it," she said.

"These students know what they are doing," Anderson said. "They are sending a gift to a child in need, and it helps them remember the meaning of the Christmas season and the gifts that the wise men brought to the Christ child."

"This project puts our family in the mood of Christmas," Handy said. "What they do here reinforces everything we are trying to teach our children at home."

This year about 400 bears were pre-hugged before being sent to the Ogden Rescue Mission, which they anticipate will last an entire year.