

School for the Blind students make dog toys for fundraiser

Project teaches them motor skills and accountability

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Fabrics in pink, green, yellow and a black-and-purple Ravens pattern dance across the table as students at the Maryland School for the Blind create dog toys as part of a fundraiser that also teaches them motor skills.

The school, which serves 185 blind and visually impaired students on its Parkville campus, has teamed with the Happy Hands, Happy Dogs fundraiser in which students make "Knots of Fun" toys for dogs and sell them on the campus. The proceeds benefit the school.

"It's a project that can be done by all our students here at school," said Dareen Barrios, the school's assistant principal and career coordinator. "Our career aid program focuses on the whole school, so we wanted something that any student can do."

To create the toys, the students braid together strips of fleece fabric and then tie them into knots. Although the process appears rigorous and the designs seem intricate, the students are able to finish the toys in just a few minutes.

"I love the round dog toys," said Rickia Ellis, a 20-year-old student with limited vision. "I love to braid. It's really fun."

About 10 students are taking part in the project. Some have a higher skill level than others, and they happily help each other.

"They can work as a team and finish the project," said Susan Sennett, the school's job coach.

Students and school officials point out that the fundraiser combines fun and work. While the students became master braiders in a matter of weeks, they also learned accountability. They must clock in and out when they enter the vocational workshop to create the toys.

The project was founded in 2011 by Lisa Kamer, a Massachusetts businesswoman who is CEO of Happy Hands, Happy Dogs. She started to make homemade toys when her new dog, Leo, became destructive, and she invited the children in her neighborhood to help. One visit stood out, when a girl who was blind in one eye took part in the toy making and played with Leo.

"The moment that happened between this little girl and my dog was perfect," Kamer said. "It spoke to me that this might be a good project."

Kamer started her fundraising project by reaching out to the Perkins School for the Blind, from which Helen Keller as well as her teacher and companion, Anne Sullivan, graduated.

Happy Hands, Happy Dogs was a good fit for Perkins, which already offered students the opportunity to engage in dog-related activities such as baking dog treats and using guide dogs.

"The toys sold out in the first hour they had them on the table," Kamer said.

Kamer eventually contacted the Maryland School for the Blind.

Founded in 1853, the Maryland Institution for the Education of the Blind began as a small school in downtown Baltimore. In 1885, the school was renamed the Maryland School for the Blind, and it moved to Parkville in 1907 to accommodate a larger group of students.

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Jermaya Taylor, 15, left, and Rickia Ellis, 20, braid fabric...
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