

Macomb Girl Scouts equip Ojibwa Elementary with food pantry

Troop 76580 aims for Bronze Award for efforts to feed those in need



Girl Scout Troop 76580 developed a community food pantry at Ojibwa Elementary School in August. Pictured are four members of the six-member troop with the pantry, which they hope will become self-sustaining. (PHOTO COURTESY OF JIM DeVLEESCHOUWER)

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Girl Scout Troop 76580 aims to provide something more nourishing than cookies to those in need in Macomb Township via a new food pantry project.

The troop installed an outdoor access food pantry at Ojibwa Elementary School, located at 46950 Heydenreich Road in Macomb Township, in early August. The pantry cupboard is located next to the school playground near the bus loop, allowing those who want to donate or those in need to have easy, drive-up access without attracting attention.

“The girls were very concerned that if a student was looking through the pantry to get food, they may be embarrassed. They thought if it was out in the open it could be done fairly discretely,” Troop Leader Jim DeVleeschouwer said.

The small troop of just six girls created the pantry as their Bronze Award project. It is the highest award Girl Scouts can earn at the junior level of scouting, generally for fourth and fifth graders. To

qualify for a Bronze Award, the selected project needed to be sustainable and help the community, Jim DeVleeschouwer said. The idea for the project began almost a year ago, when the girls started discussions during a fall camping trip to Port Huron.

“They wanted to do something to help the community, to build a pantry like a little library to help people with less, those in more need than we are,” Jim DeVleeschouwer said. “They worked on it for almost a year.”

Jim DeVleeschouwer’s daughter Madelyne DeVleeschouwer, 10, is a member of the troop. Madelyne DeVleeschouwer was a fifth grader at Ojibwa last school year, and is moving into sixth grade at Seneca Middle School this fall. She said the troop chose the project based on their observances of tighter finances among classmates and their families.

“Some people at our school had a free hot lunch at school. Some people, a lot of people actually, got a hot lunch free. We thought a food pantry would help a lot out,” Madelyne DeVleeschouwer said.

Jim DeVleeschouwer said the girls put in 20 hours apiece on the project, not only fundraising but also building the cupboard, installing it and holding a food drive to initially stock it. Ojibwa was selected as the location as the troop is chartered out of the school, Jim DeVleeschouwer said. The majority of the girls in the troop attended Ojibwa, although some girls will now move on to other schools as sixth graders in the fall.

“They had to meet with the principal to ask for permission,” Jim DeVleeschouwer said. “We spent probably three meetings coming up with the whole presentation for him, explaining what they were doing and why they were doing it.”

Fundraising for the pantry coincided with cookie sale season, and the troop set up a cookie booth at Ojibwa in February around the Super Bowl to drum up business.

“The Girl Scouts of Southeastern Michigan offered a special cookie booth. The troop applied for it for Super Bowl weekend, one week head start on the cookie sales. We applied for it but they did not have a location for us, we got to pick where we wanted. The girls went to the principal at the school and asked if they could do a drive-thru cookie booth. They got it approved,” Jim DeVleeschouwer said.

Signs and Facebook advertising brought in a good turnout at the booth, with a few hundred dollars made, Jim DeVleeschouwer said. Every girl in the troop had to invest in sweat equity to create the pantry cupboard this spring, he added.

“They physically built it with their own hands. They were using the hammer, they used the saw, they painted every part, screwed it together, dug the hole – that was fun – did a lot of sanding,” Jim DeVleeschouwer said.

One special meeting was held at a local Home Depot to select paint colors for the pantry.

“The Home Depot people got a kick out of it when we told them what we were doing it for,” he said.

The troop also collected food donations in the spring, selecting one girl's neighborhood to pass out fliers describing the project and requesting donations. They set a collection date and walked the neighborhood for pick up on porches.

"We made a flier and passed it out to each house. A week later we came back with two wagons and went to every single house and took the bags on the porches," Madelyne DeVleeschouwer said.

The troop's plan is for the pantry to serve as a donation drop off point, making it self-sustaining. Jim DeVleeschouwer said the troop is trying to get the word out on Facebook to obtain community donations, and troop members who will be attending the school in the fall plan to work with student council to encourage a food drive.

"They noticed a need in school from students that do not have as much as they do, and they thought it was a great way to help. They hope it will be self-sustaining and they will not have to stock it. They did the food drive for the initial stocking, and the day after it was stocked, I checked and it was filled even more," Jim DeVleeschouwer said.

As of Aug. 12 the troop had put in its application for the Bronze Award to a larger council, and was waiting on the process.