

Spreading Joy through Toys



Excerpts from a reflection on the PMMS Panther Pack Club Toy Drive by PASS AmeriCorps member Sydney Lawson, who is serving at Patrick Marsh Middle School in the Sun Prairie Area School District

I first want to start by saying this project was pitched by one of our Panther Pack Club members, so all credit goes to her and her great idea. After the club members decided on this idea as our next project, I went to work securing locations for where we could use as collection sites. Our club has a good relationship with The Boys and Girls Club of Sun Prairie, so I contacted them about using their building again as a location and they were more than happy to help. We additionally used the school as a collection site, which worked well for the teachers that wanted to participate and help with the project.

After securing sites, we had to quickly lock down dates for when the toy drive would be taking place. We decided on three weeks out from Christmas, December 7th-18th. This gave us two weeks for a donation window and then another week to get the toys handed out before the holidays. This meant that we had to start planning this project right after the kids came back from Thanksgiving break and prepare pretty quickly.

Once the main details of who, what, when, where, why were known, the club members started making fliers to be handed and emailed out to the community. Normally, handing out and putting up fliers would be a fun activity to do as a club, but because of COVID precautions, I did it solo. The students made fliers on Word and Google Docs and emailed them to me, I had them printed out, and then I put them up around town or emailed the PDF forms to the surrounding churches, as many agreed to put it in their weekly announcements.

With the location secured and the posters up, then we had to go for donations to come rolling in, which they definitely did. By the end of week one, both our tubs were full, so we used my office at PMMS to keep all of the toys together so that we knew what we had. In the coming days leading up to the toy drive, I made about 100 small cards that were going to be taped to the toys. The cards simply wished whoever received the toy a happy holidays, explained that it was a PMMS Panther Pack Club toy drive, and that we hoped they enjoyed their gift from us! This was important because I wanted to make sure the recipients knew of the students' efforts in making this project come to life.

While we were waiting during the donation window, the Panther Pack club members and I also had a discussion on why we were doing this project, what it meant to them, who and how it was helping the community, and why might this project be needed in the first place. Just like how we talked about food insecurity with the food drive, for this project we discussed poverty and what that means, who it affects, and how we were helping to address it.

Once the donation end date came, I collected the toys from The Boys and Girls Club along with those at the school. There were about 100 toys donated, which was more than I ever thought we would get.

My supervisor Kesha then helped me get the toys laid out so I could take pictures for my club members and get cards on each toy. For distribution, we partnered with a coworker who helps handout lunches every day and traveled with her to the three locations to hand out the toys. This would also be a great activity for club members to do if not for COVID-19, but we had to settle for just taking pictures of Kesha, our coworker Lisa, and I handing out the toys instead so I could show the club members since they were not able to come along.

At each stop, we set the toys out on our cars or in cardboard boxes and the kids and family members got to sift through the toys and choose one they liked. We tried to limit it to only one per person, so it was fair for everyone. We also had to ration the toys strategically so that we had toys left for the second and third locations. Along with handing out toys, we were going to keep some to give back to The Boys and Girls Club to show our appreciation to them, but they told us to hand them all out instead, so that is what we ended up doing. In all, we met lots of new people who were so grateful and saw lots of smiles that day which was so rewarding.

In the end, it was a really great success and an incredible experience. The Panther Pack Club members were really excited about this event because they love helping the community, and it was a project they came up with and constructed all on their own, so it was really special. Under normal circumstances, the club members would have been much more hands on in the setting up and follow through of the project, but they really enjoyed seeing the pictures and our discussions of the project nonetheless. I would highly encourage other sites to try doing a toy drive with their students. You will be shocked in the best way by the generosity of your community, and it is a great learning experience as well for the students!

Overall, it was an incredible experience for everyone involved, and we are so happy it was such a success. The Sun Prairie Community really stepped it up and were so generous this holiday season.