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Matt's Chemo Bags - A 4-H Community Service Project that Comes from the Heart

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Abstract
Matt Ferguson, a seven year Oregon 4-H member created "Matt's Chemo Bags" to help newly diagnosed cancer patients feel more comfortable on their first day of chemotherapy. Matt and his 4-H club solicit donations such as pillows, lotion, warm socks, and scarves. During a recent service project, 160 volunteers from 4-H and the community assembled 700 chemo bags ready to be delivered to oncology clinics throughout the county. Matt's project has touched the lives of over a 1,000 families in the last three years. With grants and a donation of \$25,000, Matt plans to reach out state-wide, then the nation.



Key Words: Community Service, service learning, citizenship, family and community health.

"Matt's Chemo Bags" was created by Oregon 4-H youth member Matt Ferguson in December of 2008 to provide comfort to breast cancer patients on their first day of chemotherapy. When Matt Ferguson's mother was diagnosed with breast cancer it changed his life. "It rocked our world, my sister and I had never thought about losing our mom," said Matt. "When my mom's chemotherapy was over and we knew she was going to get better, my 4-H club and I wanted to do something to help other breast cancer patients who were beginning their scary chemotherapy journey."

The bags always contain a custom made pillow, lip balm, nail file, pen, pencil, hand sanitizer, lotion, warm socks, silk scarf, tissue, moist wipes and calendar. Other items such as lap blankets and quilts, knit scarves and caps, note pads and playing cards are often donated and included in the bags. The generosity and hard work of Matt and his fellow 4-H peers bring warmth and support to hundreds of cancer patients each year. This 4-H community service project has continued to gain momentum and meet the needs of the community. During a recent service project in Washington County Oregon, 160 volunteers from 4-H and the community assembled 700 chemo bags ready to be delivered to oncology clinics throughout the county. This unique 4-H project has touched the lives of over a 1,000 families in the last three years.

Community engagement is one of the three mission mandates of 4-H. Matt has set the bar for engaging his community, empowering 4-H youth, and providing a much needed service in his county.

Meeting the Needs of the Community

When Matt's mom was diagnosed with cancer, Matt and his 4-H club saw an immediate need in their community. At a young age they were thrust into a national issue and health concern. Their project started off small, assembling gift bags for the local hospital. Seeing the vast need to help relieve some of the stress and fear of chemotherapy, Matt and his 4-H club members began soliciting donations from individuals and businesses in their community. The response from the community was overwhelming positive. Matt's 4-H club leader and Extension faculty continued to mentor Matt in the pursuit of his project. Within the last two years, Matt's project has attracted funds from a wide range of individual and corporate donors. Generous in-kind contributions have come in from Visiting Angels Home Care, The Thriftway Corporation, NW Reikii, and others.

Matt has also learned skills in grant writing. Within this last year, Matt, working with his 4-H club and the County 4-H Leaders Association, received \$7,500 in grant support.

Susan G. Komen of Oregon and SW Washington \$2,000
JC Penny Youth Engagement \$3,000
Marie Lamfrom Charitable Foundation \$2,500

Matt's Chemo Bags Continues to Grow

Plans are being developed to expand Matt's Chemo Bag project to reach all 36 counties in Oregon. This has become a reality with a generous \$25,000 cash donation from an anonymous donor. The message with the check from the donor simply stated: "this donation to help him make many more comfort bags." With the success of the Washington County Chemo Bag service day behind him, and this heartfelt donation, Matt is set to go state-wide with his project.

In the third week of June, Oregon State University Extension 4-H conducts "Summer Conference", a four day, on-campus, residential 4-H program for youth in grades 7-12. Over 300 youth from all corners of the state attend this annual event. This summer, Matt's Chemo Bags will become the service project for conference participants. 4-H youth from each county are asked to bring items to assemble Matt's Chemo Bags. The goal is to assemble 1,000 bags to be taken back to each county and be distributed by local 4-H youth to oncology clinics and health centers.

Gaining National Attention

Matt's Chemo Bags has attracted national attention. In 2010, Matt received President Obama's Volunteer Gold Service Award, a nationwide award program honoring young people for their outstanding volunteerism. That same year, he was awarded a Prudential Spirit of Community Award. John R. Strangefeld, chairman and CEO of Prudential Financial said, "People as caring and committed as these young people are critical to the future of our neighborhoods, our cities, and our nation. By recognizing these honorees, we hope to encourage other young people - our future leaders - and all Americans to think more about the value and importance of volunteering in their communities."

An eye on the nation

Matt and his 4-H club have seen the benefits of citizenship and service. They have an understanding and appreciation of helping others. By the end of 2011, Matt's Chemo Bags will have touched over 2,500 families in Oregon. Residents in all 36 counties in Oregon will have been helped by Matt's project. Matt and his club are already setting the stage to reach out beyond Oregon. They are working to develop plans to establish a model of Matt's Chemo Bags that could be replicated in every state. Matt plans to contact National 4-H to share his idea and vision.

Service and Responsibility

The Tufts University study lead by Dr. Richard Lerner on 4-H Positive Youth Development has found, "a notable trend of the study indicates that 4-H youth are three times more likely to actively contribute to their communities when compared with youth who do not participate in 4-H." Matt's Chemo Bag project is just one of the examples of 4-H youth giving back to their community. Along with helping thousands of families who have a family member struck with cancer, Matt and his 4-H club are setting the bar as part of the 4-H Revolution of Responsibility.

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