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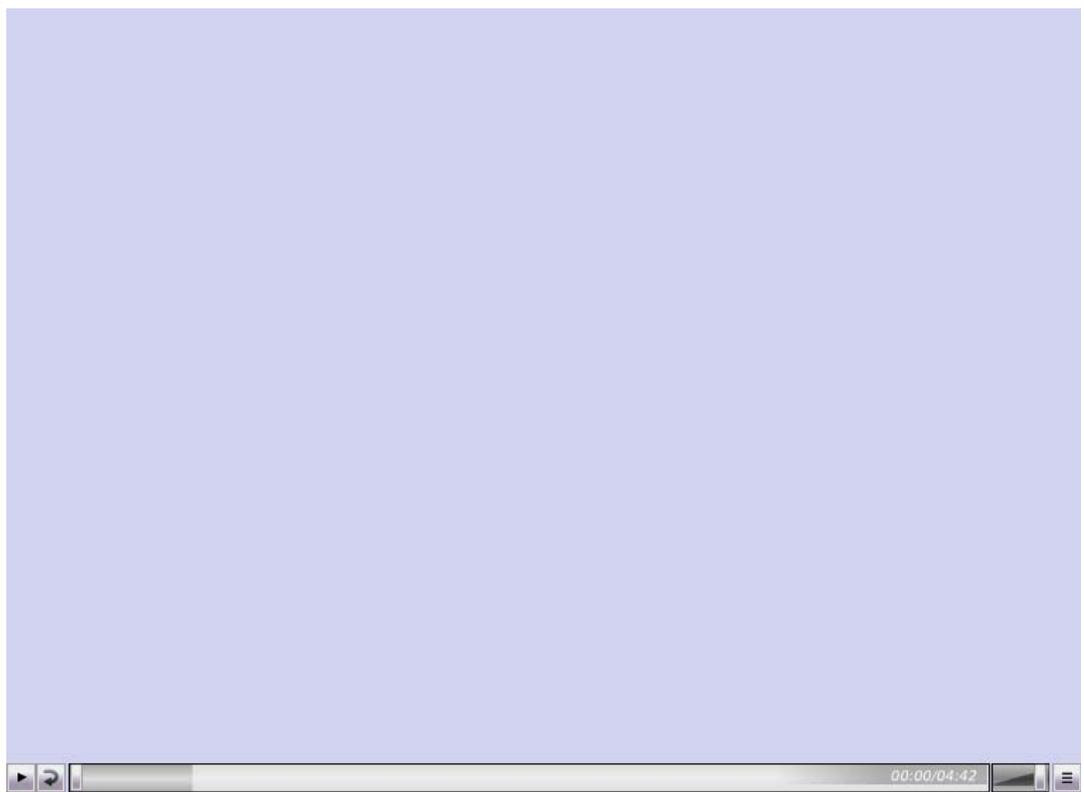
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Kindergartens Learn New Math: a Dozen Chairs Change 12 Lives

By JACKIE HILTON Special to the Independent



Photo courtesy of Free Wheelchair Mission Top of the World kindergartners Jade Howson, left, and

When the Top of the World kindergarten set out to raise funds for Irvine-based Free Wheelchair Mission, their success not only surprised the students but their teachers, too.

Under an initiative suggested by kindergarten teacher Megan Bartlett, each child was asked to raise \$2 to help towards the purchase of four low-cost wheelchairs.

The untraditional chairs cost \$48.35 each, which includes the cost of manufacturing and distribution.

The challenge in December empowered the students, according to Bartlett, who returned to the classroom excited to share their stories about raising their individual contribution.

These included earning money by helping around the house, making their bed or washing the family car, and emptying personal piggy banks.

A few children went a step further and began their own fundraising mission,

Zanessa Gee with one of the low-cost wheelchairs the Irvine non-profit distributes to the disabled in developing countries.

selling hot chocolate and cookies in their neighborhood, Bartlett said. Others inspired family and friends to donate to their adopted cause. Some families even supported the kid's efforts by sponsoring an entire wheelchair.

The good will of giving to help others in need spread contagiously through the fiveTop of the World kindergarten classes. Bartlett's colleagues are Kathy

Cotton and Leslie Monroe.

Through their generosity and hard work, last December kindergartners raised \$621, enough for 12 wheelchairs, which will change a dozen people's lives forever.

"We are so proud of these kindergartners!" said Alyson Roth, a spokeswoman for Free Wheelchair Mission, who brought one of the wheelchairs to the campus to share with some of the organization's youngest donors. Bartlett's parents are also Free Wheelchair Mission donors.

Last year, the organization collected \$1.3 million in contributions and since its founding in 2001 has distributed 302,653 wheelchairs, Roth said.

The organization was founded by Santa Ana's Don Schoendorfer, who was inspired by his pastor's sermon, a "Fool's Game," about putting off humanitarian work in favor of career goals. Schoendorfer remained haunted by an encounter 20 years ago on a trip to Morocco, where he saw a partially paralyzed woman who literally dragged herself across the street.

Goaded from the pulpit, the MIT-trained engineer in 2000 started tinkering with designs in his garage, Roth said, taking four of his chairs on a mission to India with Irvine-based Mariners Church. That's how the organization began, she said.

With a low-cost design using plastic lawn chairs, bicycle wheels and some tubing, Schoendorfer envisioned transforming lives in developing countries through the gift of mobility. His efforts have earned national recognition, including praise from President Bush.

The lack of liability insurance prevents distribution of the chairs to the poor in the U.S., Roth said. The wheelchairs are made in China, closer to where most are distributed, she said.

See a video about the impact of donors' gifts in Uganda online under schools at www.lbindy.com. -- *Andrea Adelson contributed to the story.*