AN ANGEL AMONG US
Genevieve Pitutto
Pajama Program
Irvington resident Genevieve Pitutto, the 50-year-old founder of the Pajama Program, which gives abused, neglected, or otherwise needy children warm pajamas and books, recalls the day 11 years ago that she visited a center in Harlem for children whose mothers were in prison. "My intention was to read with them in the evening, after my workday. As I said goodbye, I watched the children go into a nearby room to sleep. There was no changing of their clothes, no bedtime stories, no hugs from moms or dads. I was paralyzed. This was not the way bedtime was supposed to be for a child. I asked the staff if they needed pajamas. Could I bring some?"

The following week, Pitutto brought 12 pairs of pajamas with her. "One little girl asked, 'What are these? Where do I wear them?'" When Pitutto asked the child what she usually wore to bed, she responded, "My pants." A few weeks later, Pitutto says, "I felt what I can only describe as a 'raindrop' fall onto my head and the words 'Pajama Program' spoke to me from it loud and clear. I knew I'd had found my true purpose in life and it drives me day and night."

Pitutto thought of nothing else as she continued at her job, working in marketing for an Italian importer. She'd graduated from Fordham in 1983 and began climbing the ladder at various companies from intern to manager to director and, eventually, to vice president for the importer. At some point, she realized that she was "working to make people richer, not helping people who needed help."

With her husband, Demo DiMartile—and with no business plan—the Yonkers native (and Lincoln High School grad) corralled her family and friends ("I had two friends who told me I was crazy to take this on," she recalls, "I don't see them anymore!") and started the Pajama Program by "buying pajamas, asking friends and family to buy pajamas"—and taking them to different places in Westchester, including the Andrus Children's Center, which offered Pitutto space on its campus. It was the first Pajama Program Reading Center. A national parenting magazine took note, and Pitutto began receiving box loads of pajamas, and cash and check donations. The program today has more than 50 major corporate sponsors, including Target, Carter's, Scholastic, Bob's Discount Furniture, and Rye-based County Coach, whose owner, David Kucera, lived at Andrus from age seven to 14. The program has received accolades from the Wall Street Journal, the Today show, and Oprah.

"Our goal for 2011-12 is to raise one million dollars," Pitutto says, "and to give every group of children pajamas and books four times a year—one for each season."