Hugs of hope

One of Genevieve Piturro's fondest childhood memories was snuggling in cozy p.j.'s as her mom read her a bedtime story. So when she learned that too many needy children never know that joy, she set out to bring them exactly the kind of comfort they'd need to have sweeter dreams!

As night fell, Genevieve Piturro watched the children at the shelter where she volunteered climb into their cots just before lights-out—and tried to hold back her tears.

It was bad enough that these kids had no moms or dads to help with their homework, no one to celebrate their birthdays or promise them they could be anything when they grew up. But, the Irvington, New York, businesswoman realized, they didn't even have anyone to tuck them in. They didn't have anybody to read them bedtime stories. They didn't even have pajamas!

Genevieve knew the shelter was doing the best it could, providing a safe haven for these children who had been abandoned or abused. But these poor kids already had so little, she sighed. How are they supposed to face tomorrow with hope when they can't even get a good night's sleep?

All her life, Genevieve had adored children, playing games with her nieces and nephews, and passing out goody bags to neighborhood kids on Halloween. But while she hadn't been blessed with children of her own, she longed to touch young lives in a meaningful way.

"Why don't you read to kids in the shelter?" Genevieve's husband, Demo, suggested, and she thought: That sounds like a great idea!

No p.j.'s and bedtime stories?

But now, as Genevieve saw the children ready to go to sleep in the same clothes they'd worn all day, she asked, "Don't they put on pajamas?" The shelter worker sighed, "They don't have any.

Genevieve's heart broke as she thought about how, growing up, bedtime was one of her favorite parts of the day. How she'd slip into her jammies and her mom would read her a story as she drifted off to sleep. How close, how warm, how loved she felt.

It was like a hug before heading to dreamland, Genevieve recalled. Yet these children had nothing at all to comfort them through the long night.

Genevieve knew she couldn't erase the pain they'd endured in their lives. But maybe, she thought, she could calm their fears and sadness just a little by giving them warm pajamas to snuggle in.

So the next time Genevieve visited, she brought a big shopping bag filled with new p.j.'s. "Wow!" a little girl's eyes sparkled when she saw a princess nightgown. And when Genevieve handed a boy a pair of Batman jammies complete with a cape, he beamed, "Cool!"

Still, a little part of Genevieve ached. She couldn't afford pajamas for every child. And there were still so many kids who were in need...

So Genevieve began asking everyone she knew, "Please open your heart and help me make a difference for kids who really need sweet dreams!" And as word spread, boxes and boxes of pajamas and books started arriving at Genevieve's condo.

And that wasn't all! Someone donated a van to help deliver the pajamas to local shelters, while others offered to pack and ship donations nationwide. Still more volunteers signed on to read kids bedtime stories before lights-out!

"This is wonderful!" Genevieve marveled—and soon the Pajama Program (PajamaProgram.org) was born!

"Every child deserves to feel loved," says Genevieve. "A cozy pair of p.j.'s is my way of letting them know that someone cares!"

Does your child have trouble sleeping?

Here's how to ease him into slumberland!

✓ Make him the hero! Next time you tell a bedtime story, make your child the lead character and develop an exciting plotline. This turns bedtime into a fun adventure that kids look forward to!

✓ Keep to a schedule! Research shows that sticking to regular bed- and wake-up times minimizes tossing and turning, making kids more productive at school and extracurricular activities. (On weekends, discourage children from sleeping in more than an hour.)

Tip! Find a Pajama Program chapter near you at PajamaProgram.org—and get info on hosting your own p.j. drive!

Giving kids sweeter dreams

Soon, children in homeless shelters, treatment centers and foster homes from coast to coast were sending Genevieve letters scrawled in crayon and marker.

"Thanks so much! an eight-year-old boy named Isaiah wrote. Sisters named Mari and Maya penned: Thank you so very, very much. They're the first p.j.'s we've owned! And as Genevieve looked at the sweet, smiling faces in the enclosed pictures, she couldn't help but smile, too. Because as simple as the gifts Genevieve had sent were, they seemed truly to be making a difference.

"Your package is helping to heal these children with broken hearts and spirits by making them feel loved," explained the director of Our Little Haven, a St. Louis care center for abused, neglected and special-needs children.

And JaNeAl Dropette of Chrysalis, an Arizona shelter for victims of domestic abuse, wrote: Everyone who comes here needs a fresh start. New pajamas go a long way to helping those new beginnings!

Today, eight years after the Pajama Project began, Genevieve continues to have a wish: for every child to have someone who loves them to tuck them in each night. But until then, the Pajama Program will be there with new p.j.'s and bedtime stories so that kids without families can still have good nights—and even brighter tomorrows.

"It's amazing that p.j.'s can touch so many lives—350,000 and counting!" Genevieve marvels. "But they're reminders that someone cares. And for me, it's like giving these children hugs of hope every night!"

—Kristin Higson-Hughes