Books for kids? It’s covered

When Cara Usatch felt the little boy nestle into her side, her heart melted.

As a volunteer for the Pajama Program — a national, Manhattan-based nonprofit — she was delighted when the child plucked one of her personal favorites, “Where the Wild Things Are,” off the bookshelf. “He was just leaning into me as we read, and it was just so wonderful,” Usatch said.

“Just knowing for that few minutes he was comfortable and cozy and feeling happy, it was really nice. I told all my friends about it.”

Usatch, 51, is a Bayside, Queens, resident who teaches kindergarten at Public School 385 in East Flatbush, Brooklyn. The veteran teacher is also one of hundreds of Pajama Program volunteers who work throughout the U.S.

For a few years now, Usatch’s school has collected sleepwear for the Pajama Program to pass out to needy kids. And during the summers, when classes are out, Usatch also attends the Pajama Program’s “reading parties” for kids from New York City’s homeless or domestic abuse shelters, temporary group homes and after-school programs.

Founded a decade ago, the Pajama Program now has 79 chapters throughout 44 states that serves kids ranging from babies on up to 17-year-olds.

Genevieve Pituro, 50, the charity’s founder and executive director, conceived the idea when she started volunteering on her own at shelters, reading with kids for an hour each week. During her visits, Pituro noticed that the children often didn’t have anything to change into for bedtime.

“Usually, they were recently removed from an abusive situation,” she said. “And I was just so saddened. All they had were their day clothes. Some of them were soiled and some of them didn’t fit.”

Eventually, Pituro recruited others to her cause.

“I thought it was just a good bedtime experience, just to soothe their minds, giving them some pretty pictures to look at when I left, fall asleep holding something that was theirs,” she said.

Want to help your own kid read? New York City will soon be eligible to get up to 60 free books, in a new collaborative effort between the city and country singer Dolly Parton.

Parton started the program in her home state of Tennessee in 1996. The city’s Imagination Library is now in pilot program mode, but aims to eventually mail every child in the five boroughs one book a month until they turn 5.

“The NYC Imagination Library Program fosters a love of reading between parents and their children while building critical early literacy skills that we know will boost their child’s future academic achievement,” said Sharon Rencher, executive director of the program.

For more information on either program, go to pajamaprogram.org and imaginationlibrary.com.