BY MARIA ALVAREZ
Special to Newsday

Genevieve Piturro was single and had a successful marketing career in Manhattan when she decided to volunteer at a Westchester shelter for homeless families 10 years ago.

"I missed having kids in my life," said the 51-year-old, who is married but has no children. At the shelter, she realized many of the children were sleeping in their clothes and went to bed without a bedtime story or a book to hold.

"I was horrified," said Piturro, who was moved to found the Pajama Program, a nonprofit in which children receive a new pair of pajamas and are read stories by volunteers.

Piturro, of Yonkers, found a one-bedroom East Side apartment and converted it into space where volunteers read to children who are homeless, abandoned or living in group homes.

"A bedtime story is a gift — a ritual of private time that makes a child feel safe," Piturro said. Reading a book offers children a respite — an escape from living "a life of instability," she said.

Three days a week, twice a day, as many as 20 kids visit the carpeted living room with its wall-size bookshelves. The children pick books they want volunteers to read and get to keep that book.

There are more than 60 chapters in the region, including one in Commack. Last year, the Pajama Program distributed 253,471 pajamas, and 238,746 books. The Long Island chapter, which services Nassau and Suffolk counties, has distributed 20,000 pajamas and 17,000 books in the past two years, said chapter president Danielle Bonfanti of Commack.

During the sessions, the children nibble on cookies, sip juice and share their thoughts about the books.

Four-year-old Lelia, after hearing a story read to her by volunteer Tiffany France, said, "Now, I'm going to read to everybody." France, 26, of Manhattan, said the little girl was "so excited ... She was laughing and asking questions."

At the end of the hour-long reading session, the children — brought to the center from the five boroughs — receive pajamas, a first-time experience for many of them, Piturro said.

Taharka, 4, put on his Batman PJ's during his visit. "I'm flying," he said zooming across the room.

Piturro gets money and services from grants, foundations and private corporations, as well as a fundraiser that recognizes a person who makes a big difference in a child's life. This year's mission is to find a larger headquarters and provide 500,000 new pajamas and books to children, said Piturro.

This year's fundraiser, a gala dinner, is tomorrow at Manhattan's Capitale. The goal is to raise $1 million.

The honoree will be Laura Schroff, author of "Invisible Thread," a true story about Schroff's experience befriending a homeless boy in her Upper West Side Manhattan neighborhood.

Schroff, 60, who grew up in Huntington, said her friendship with the boy Maurice, started when she took him out for a hamburger: "It's a simple gesture that becomes so essential, and the Pajama Program really puts that into perspective."