SWEET DREAMS
Thanks to one woman’s leadership, more than two million pairs of pajamas and children’s books have been donated to kids in need.

One day in the late ’90s, when Genevieve Piturro was volunteering at a homeless shelter, she met a little girl who would forever change the course of her life.

“I was holding several pairs of pajamas to donate to the kids, and this girl asked me what was in my hands,” recalls Piturro, who is now the founder and executive director of the nonprofit Pajama Program. “She had never owned a pair of pajamas, and when she told me she usually wore pants to bed, I felt something inside driving me to see what I could do to help.”

Piturro, who had been a frequent volunteer for the Starlight Children’s Foundation, never intended to start a nonprofit. Instead, she just kept buying pajamas to give to kids. When friends or family members asked her what she wanted for the holidays or for her birthday, she asked for PJs or money to buy them. Soon enough, she was asking friends to help her hand them out at shelters and had the makings of her own volunteer organization.

Her efforts really took off in late 2001 when the media began to take notice. “I think what we were doing hit home since this was just a few months after 9/11,” Piturro says. “People couldn’t do enough for each other—it was such a sentimental time for America.”

Piturro soon began receiving box upon box of pajamas as well as letters and cash at her home in Irvington, New York. “My husband and I couldn’t believe how much help we were getting,” she says. By 2002, the Pajama Program had received its official 501(c)(3) status.

At first Piturro and her team reached out to shelters to donate pajamas to the homeless or abandoned children living there, but the program quickly expanded as people clamored to get involved. Today, there are more than 50 chapters of the Pajama Program across the country, each of which has local volunteers who organize drives to collect and distribute books and pajamas to needy children in their community. But the hallmark of the nonprofit is its three New York City–area permanent reading rooms where groups of at-risk kids can come for story time.

“When the kids walk in for the first time, they’re sometimes nervous,” Piturro says of the 500 children who visit the reading centers each month. “But once they get to the reading rooms, they’re usually giggling and laughing, and by the end of the story they’re nestled up to the volunteer who is reading to them.”

At the end of the reading, every child gets to pick out a new book to keep before being given a pair of PJs in their size, wrapped in a ribbon. “When it’s time for the children to get their pajamas, everyone sits in a circle clapping,” Piturro says. “It’s a really special moment.”

In 2008, Scholastic began donating books to the Pajama Program, and a year later Carter’s became the organization’s pajama–providing partner. The two companies donate about a third of the items the nonprofit distributes. The rest comes from individual donors.

Recognizing the ever-increasing number of American children in need, Piturro upped the ante in October 2013 with the One Million Good Nights campaign, which has a goal of collecting one million additional new pajamas and one million additional new books. The campaign runs through December 2015 and as of press time had collected about 600,000 pairs of pajamas and 700,000 books.

And Piturro certainly isn’t stopping there. Her next goal is to open more reading centers. “I started this organization because I know how important it is to feel safe and to know there is someone there for you at bedtime,” she says. “That foundation gives you the strength to carry on through life when you feel lonely or when something goes wrong. We hope to give these children one very special moment they will always remember.”

HOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE
- Set up a pajama and book drive at your child’s school or another local organization. (All goods must be brand-new, and pajamas should have price tags attached.) Visit pajamaprogram.org/chapters to find a local chapter that can help you coordinate your drive.
- If you don’t have a chapter near you, consider starting one. The Pajama Program currently operates in 33 states but is always looking for dedicated volunteers to help expand its reach.
- Send donations of books, pajamas, or money to the New York City headquarters. Visit pajamaprogram.org/help-pajama-program for more information.
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