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Local teen an activist for children

By Marny O'Brien, Contributing Writer

Shrewsbury

9/22/2006



Shrewsbury - If you asked Daniel Levine what he did last summer, you'd be surprised at the answer. While many of his peers were enjoying the summer before their senior year of high school, this 17-year-old started a nonprofit organization.

The Massachusetts Children's Fund came into being in June and its sole purpose is providing jarred baby food and supplies to families in need.

"Mainly it's my dad [Steve] and I who are driving the Massachusetts Children's Fund," Daniel said. "I'm president and chairman, my dad is the treasurer and we're on the board of directors. My mom, Jamie, is a huge help. She's an ambassador with the Worcester area branch of the Department of Social Services."

While taking care of foster care children from the Worcester area, the family realized that many of the children had been malnourished.

"We saw first-hand that five minutes from our Shrewsbury home families are in need," Daniel said.

According to Daniel, the goal of the organization is to fill in a loophole that's been created. He stated that organizations like the Women, Infant and Children (WIC) program, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provide only dry cereal and liquid formula to families.

Food banks don't handle baby food in glass jars and food pantries don't provide them, considering them "prepared luxury items."

Families are forced to improvise.

"Mothers fill a bottle with formula and dry cereal to form a paste," Daniel said. "They chop up whatever adult food they have - hot dogs, mashed up French fries, bologna, etc. - mix it up, cut off the tip of the bottle, and feed their babies."

The Shrewsbury High student doesn't criticize these organizations and knows there are many families in need.

"Over 100,000 families with children sought food assistance in 2005," he said. "Many of the young babies have never eaten jarred baby food before."

In addition to contributing food, community members can help by sponsoring a child. A link has been added to the Massachusetts Children's Fund's Web site for that purpose.

Besides malnutrition, Levine said there's also a shortage of baby supplies, such as diapers, carriages and strollers.

"A sub-goal of the fund is to collect baby supplies to make sure that babies aren't falling asleep on a towel on the floor," he said. "Even when in shelters, they don't get the proper supplies."

One day they hope to have enough food and supplies to fill a store that would be just for those in need.

Daniel stressed that 100 percent of the donations the fund receives go to the kids and that all of the start-up costs are coming out of the family's pocket.

"Thankfully we have a lot of people who are willing to volunteer their time and effort," Daniel said. "Massachusetts is a very generous state."

For the past 15 years, Daniel's father has been running Thanksgiving food drives raising 10,000 pounds of food each year. Last winter Steve and his friends collected 22,000 pounds of food supplies for Hurricane Katrina victims.

The Levines hope to motivate others to take up the cause.

"Kids need to understand that starvation isn't just in Ethiopia," Steve said. "Starvation is here." Now that he's back to school, Daniel continues his work with the Massachusetts Children's Fund and stressed that even when he goes off to college he'll be involved, thanks to e-mail.

"It's more than me," he said. "I'm going to feed 100,000 kids."

For more information about the Massachusetts Children's Fund, visit the Web sites at www.machildrensfund.com and www.babyfooddrive.net.



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