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His mission: Healthy food for babies in homeless shelters The Boston Globe

By Megan Woolhouse, Globe Staff | October 1, 2006

Dozens of foster children have passed through the Levine home in Shrewsbury, sometimes twice, and each of their stories affected 17-year-old Dan Levine.

Levine saw kids with broken bones. He listened to others tell tales of abuse. For them, he could offer little more than sympathy. But when it came to the babies who had been raised on junk food, he thought he could make a difference.

“People in general need to realize that life is pretty good if you can feed your kid Gerber food,” he said, “that you’re fortunate.”

Levine has launched the Massachusetts Children’s Fund to collect baby food and distribute it at shelters in Worcester County. His parents, recently named foster parents of the year by the state’s Department of Social Services, helped him recruit an advisory board that includes DSS Commissioner Harry Spence.

“There’s a generosity gene in this family,” said Spence, who got to know the Levines at a benefit concert they organized to reunite siblings in foster care.

The Levines provide emergency care for foster babies while DSS determines their future. Dan Levine’s mother, Jamie, visited a Worcester shelter last year to check up on one of the babies and learned that the shelter had nothing more than dry baby food and formula -- no cooked and mashed vegetables or fruit -- and that young mothers often fed their young children french fries and diced hot dogs.

The family discussed the situation around the dinner table that night and Dan Levine said he was appalled. “Chopped hot dogs and mashed french fries? Ugh!” he recalled thinking.

He suggested organizing a food drive -- something the family had done many times before. But his father said there were drawbacks.

“I said if you want to do it, then do it, but a food drive is a one-time

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stopgap measure," Steve Levine recalled. "It's just going to put a meal on the table."

Instead, the Levines helped their son create a charity they hope will provide shelters with appropriate food for babies for the long term.

He wants to recruit volunteers to start similar food drives elsewhere in the state. The charity is also soliciting donations through the Internet.

Levine's parents paid \$1,000 to launch the initiative, hiring an agency to arrange for nonprofit status and build its website, www.machildrensfund.com.

Steve Levine, an active real estate agent, also capitalized on his network of contacts to help launch the effort.

The fund has already raised \$7,000 in donations and pledges, he said.

Dan Levine said he spread word of the project through his youth group, the Westborough Area Federation for Temple Youth, and its national chapter.

A Shrewsbury student contacted him about hosting a baby-food drive at the Spring Street School, and Levine provided a flier based on a template he had created for advertising food drives.

Levine will be graduating High School and off to college next year. He plans to continue managing the operation from there, writing requests for grants from large foundations and soliciting student involvement.

His former principal at Shrewsbury High, Dan Gutekanst, is confident Levine will succeed.

"What I like about him is he can see the big picture, about how it's important to work with others and engage the community so all of us can thrive," said Gutekanst, now school superintendent in Needham. "He's a dynamite young man."

Primarily through word of mouth -- the charity is not yet incorporated -- donations of baby food have already been delivered to the Worcester shelter.

"It feels good to help all these kids that have literally been in my home," Levine said. "To see a problem and do something about it -- that's what has really gotten me motivated."

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