

Xavier, Age 4, and his mom, Tami Lee

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Every Friday around noon, 4-year old Xavier May and his mother, Tami Lee, board the elevator at Fairview-Ebenezer Tower Apartments in Minneapolis, pushing a cart carrying Meals on Wheels for about 20 low-income senior residents. They start on the top floor and work their way down.

In addition to delivering meals, the two visit with each resident, many of whom have no family nearby. "Xavier and I have a lot of friends in the building now," Lee said. "They really love him. It's pretty heartwarming for me to see my little guy hugging them or holding their hands. They have become like family for us, too."

With almost 170 service hours in just two years under his little belt, Xavier was recognized as the youngest volunteer in Fairview-Ebenezer history during its annual volunteer appreciation event in April.

"One thing my husband and I really want for Xavy is for him to develop a sense of compassion," said Lee, who lives in St. Paul. "He doesn't even know what that word means, but we're hoping this is planting the seed."

Jenny Friedman, author of "The Busy Family's Guide to Volunteering" and founder of Doing Good Together, a Minneapolis volunteering resource, said the interest in family volunteerism is indicative of concerns parents have about cultural influences on their children.

"Instead of focusing on materialism and self-centeredness, volunteering together offers families a powerful hands-on way to reinforce their own values and make a positive difference in their communities," she said. Kitchen table projects -- such as writing letters to soldiers serving in the military or making cards for hospitalized children -- are great ways to help others and require very little time commitment.

One key element about volunteering with children is in the time spent afterward reflecting about the meaning of service. If your family volunteers at a shelter, kids will likely have questions about people they've met or what they saw, Friedman said. The conversation is as valuable as the action.

Even at Xavier's age, his experiences with Meals on Wheels have provoked questions. "We talk about being young, being old, being sick, being poor," Lee said. "He really notices these things and asks about them."

Doing Good Together partners with several organizations, including the Minnesota Children's Museum (www.mcm.org), which will sponsor an event Jan. 15-30 called "Small Hands, Big Hearts: Spark the Spirit of Giving." Museum visitors can make place mats for Meals on Wheels, create cards for hospitalized children, or bring donations for the "sock hop line." New socks will be collected for the Simpson House, which operates emergency shelters in Minneapolis.

"We want to create opportunities for small projects that everyone can do," said Michelle Blodgett, program developer. Second Harvest Heartland, the Animal Humane Society and Cheerful Givers will be on hand to accept monetary donations. Doing Good Together will provide talking points for parents who want to find ways to make volunteerism a regular part of family life.

"Adults who volunteered as children are much more likely to continue doing so throughout their lives," Friedman said. "Parents have the opportunity to create that new generation of volunteers."