

# When life gave fellow student the blues, New Braunfels fourth-graders came to rescue

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Emmilie Vann, left, and Brittney Etheredge, fourth-graders at Memorial Elementary School, pose with some of the more than 600 pairs of jeans they collected with their Jeans for Teens project.

**NEW BRAUNFELS** — It all began during the cold of winter 2011, when Brittney Etheredge and Emmilie Vann, fourth-graders at Memorial Elementary School, learned their classmate Sara’s birthday was approaching.

Sara confided in Brittney and Emmilie that she wanted only a warm coat, clothes and socks as birthday presents. The girls were surprised to learn that such basic needs would be someone’s birthday wish.

“Most kids we know ask for an iPod or something like that for their birthday,” Brittney said.

“But then we realized Sara didn’t have many clothes, and we felt sad for her,” Emmilie said.

After talking to their parents about it, the girls bought their friend Sara a couple of outfits, which they wrapped and placed anonymously on her desk at school. They watched from afar as their unassuming classmate unwrapped the gifts from her “secret pal.”

Learning about these basic needs was eye-opening for Brittney and Emmilie, both fortunate enough to come from homes where their essential needs are met. On first impressions, the two friends are average kids. Brittney is a Girl Scout, Emmilie wants to be a veterinarian, and both girls love to dance.

When asked about their everyday encounters and their not-so-everyday accomplishments, however, the girls reveal a maturity and sensitivity beyond their years.

### Jeans for Teens

Experiencing the joy of helping Sara and wanting to help others, the girls began brainstorming ways to make a difference. That's when "Jeans for Teens" was born.

"Not everyone can afford warm clothes, and jeans are one of the most expensive things," Brittney said.

Armed with a helping spirit and a half-hatched plan, Brittney approached Principal Duane Trujillo for permission to proceed with the project. Trujillo thought it was a great idea and agreed to let the girls use the school parking lot as their home base for the jean drive.

"We realized all of a sudden that our girls had gotten us into something big," said Francine Vann, Emmilie's mom, "and then it all happened really fast."

### Spreading the word

With the support of their parents, their principal, teacher Belinda Seaman, and a handful of friends, Brittney and Emmilie embarked on their mission. They spread the word at school by making "jeans updates" announcements over the loud speaker and at assemblies, holding signs in the parking lot, and sending fliers home to parents.

Soon, the jeans started to roll in to the homemade drop boxes at school.

The girls' parents, who are involved in the community, spread news of the project with their friends and colleagues at work and on Facebook. As president of the Rotary Club of New Braunfels, Britt Etheredge, Brittney's dad, shared his daughter's endeavors with the club, which in turn collected more than 90 pairs of jeans.

A box of jeans came in the mail all the way from Indiana. "It was so cool to see jeans come in from that far away," Brittney said.

Three Saturdays in a row, the girls and their committed Jeans for Teens team weathered the cold and rain as they accepted donations in the school parking lot. In the end, 605 pairs of jeans were collected — far exceeding the original goal of 500.

With jeans outnumbering their hopes, the girls started taking orders in their school. But the surprising success of their grassroots operation presented the opportunity — and the challenge — of distributing the jeans among the broader community.

How would they assess people's needs, much less their sizes?

### Choosing CIS

Knowing that they wanted the fruits of their labor to directly benefit the New Braunfels and nearby Canyon Lake communities, the families explored various local nonprofit channels before deciding on Communities In Schools of South Central Texas (CIS), the New Braunfels area chapter of the nation's leading organization dedicated to empowering students to stay in school and achieve in life.

"We talked to several organizations in town, and as it turns out," said Melissa Etheredge, Brittney's mom, "CIS helps those organizations too. The whole process was simplified by letting CIS handle distribution."

Christine Douglas, executive director of CIS South Central, was thrilled by the donation and agreed that the Jeans for Teens initiative was in line with the organization's mission.

"Communities in Schools partners with local community members to bring resources of all kinds to kids and families who need them," Douglas said. "This is another example of the kinds of partnerships we develop and of how we are able to, through direct contact with kids and their families, streamline resources and be effective."

CIS has contacted other organizations who provide services to children in need to make the jeans available to them. With more than 600 pairs of jeans to go around, many children — both CIS participants and nonparticipants — have benefitted.

"These young girls have shown community spirit and leadership beyond their years," Douglas said. "CIS realizes that a low self-image, along with so many other things, can be a barrier to being successful in school. The embarrassment of wearing the same clothes every day may seem like a small thing, but it can contribute to a student not wanting to come to school.

"For these 10-year-old girls to realize that is pretty special."

On to the next project

After personally interviewing the girls, Douglas was impressed by their generosity of spirit, which extends beyond this particular endeavor. Brittney and Emmilie shared with Douglas some of their daily experiences at school; on the playground, they make a point to reach out to kids who are being excluded and to support those who are being bullied for being different.

“We may look different, but we are all really the same,” they told Douglas.

Brittney’s and Emmilie’s parents are proud because their kids appreciate what they have.

“It’s not all about them,” Francine Vann said. “When I was growing up, my family was very poor. I was one of the kids who couldn’t afford my own clothes and wore shoes that didn’t fit.

“I don’t ever want my kids to feel bad about what they have, but I want them to see other ways of living and to ask questions.”

Brittney and Emmilie have been able to meet an essential need for many children and to set an example of leadership for other students.

“Our girls started this campaign,” Vann said, “but the thought became a reality because their peers believed in the vision and were inspired to action.”

Now that their eyes have been opened to being a catalyst for good in the community, Brittney and Emmilie are thinking about the future. They hope to see the jean drive evolve into an annual event, and they are already busy brainstorming about the details.