Hardhats help schoolkids at P.S. 119 raise big bucks for Haiti earthquake victims

Michael Daly

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PS 119 Principal Lisa Fernandez with students and Athar (Mani) Usmani, one of 15 construction workers who collected $1,500 and donated it to the school's benefit to help earthquake victims.

The meaning was instantly clear to anybody who knew about the three angels in hardhats who stopped into this Flatbush school's benefit dance for children in Haiti on Friday evening.

The trio came as representatives of the 15 workers who are renovating PS 119's exterior after school hours.

Their supervisor, Athar Usmani, who is known as Mani, took a white envelope from his pocket and handed it to the principal, Lisa Fernandez.

"I looked at it and said, 'Thank you,'" Fernandez recalled. "He said, 'It's about $1,500.' And then I couldn't speak."

The workers were already moving to leave.

"I said, 'Why don't you stay and dance?''' Fernandez recalled. "They said, 'No, we have to work.'"
The trio then made a magical moment even better.

"They danced their way out," Fernandez recalled. "In their hardhats."

One of the school's students lost her mother in Haiti and many others have relatives there. They had come to Fernandez in the earthquake's aftermath saying they wanted to do something.

"They said, 'Ms. Fernandez, what can we do? We're only kids,'" Fernandez recalled. "I said, 'You can do a lot.'"

The result was the benefit, which the workers learned about when Usmani asked Fernandez if they could take advantage of the relatively mild weather and work on Thursday and Friday night. She told them that the school's winter concert was on Thursday and the benefit for the children of Haiti was on Friday.

Usmani pledged they would only do some quiet caulking and Fernandez gave her approval. That had affirmed the good feelings the workers had developed for the school, and the workers needed no convincing that children of Haiti need all the help they can get.

"It is a very noble cause," Usmani said.

He took up a collection and had to do little persuading even in this tough economy.

"Everybody was willing," he said.

The urge to help that propelled the youngsters inside the school proved to be just as strong among the workers who labor on the exterior. The lesson is for us all.

"Everybody has a good person inside, you just have to bring it out," Usmani said. "You have to ignite the spirit."

He and the two others took time off from their labors only long enough to present the envelope.

"Five minutes, that's all," Usmani said. "We are at work."

They continued their quiet caulking as the teachers and students raised $1,700 of their own, raffling off donated items and selling snacks and coffee as well as collecting $5 per family at the door.

The workers brought the total to $3,200. And yesterday morning, some of the fourth- and fifth-graders joined teacher Gen Berretta in the library to write thank-you letters. Berretta asked some of the words they might use.

"Generous!" said one youngster.

"Selfless!" said another.
Berretta wrote the words on an easel. Along with construction worker and $1,500 and WOW!

"When I saw the amount ... it actually brought tears to my eyes," Fernandez said.

"That means it touched you to the core of your heart," a youngster declared.

Then Yvee, Gerard, Yamrod, Diandre, Kimberly, Wiguerson, Goetty, Jordan, Tatiana, Justin and Matthew wrote thank-you letters from the core of their own young and golden hearts.

"It's like you were the light of Haiti and the angels sent you from heaven," one wrote, adding, "Mani Rocks!"