Clarke M.S. raise $4,000 for several charities
Penny Harvest program thrives in ninth year at middle school
By Mike Caputo
7/2/10

After months of fundraising efforts, a group of W.T. Clarke Middle School students had to decide what to do with the $4,000 they raised.

The students in grades six through eight, led by their teacher Debbie Marks, had options. Instead of donating $1,000 to four causes, the students decided to divvy up the funds to an array of organizations — 18 of them.

The volunteer efforts were performed as part of Clarke’s Penny Harvest program.

Clarke is the only Long Island public school to participate in the program, which is part of the New York City-based Common Cents organization. Penny Harvest is aimed at introducing children to philanthropic endeavors, while incorporating strategies as simple as collecting pennies.

The Clarke project was spearheaded by Marks’ grade 6-8 class and assisted by the Penny Harvest Service Learning Club.

Selecting the organizations was an arduous process that involved input from many students. It involved, as Marks called it, a winter long “roundtable democracy.”

“The voices of the students are being heard,” Marks said. “The kids vote and I think that makes it so unique.”

More than 50 causes were considered, and the votes reduced the number to the final 18. Once that process was completed, participants prepared to present the money along with a gift that fits the organization. Among those selected were the Ronald McDonald House in New Hyde Park and the 1 in 9 Long Island Breast Cancer Coalition in Hewlett.

Then came the presentation and celebration. The students met with representatives from the organizations they supported, who explained how their money will be spent.

“The organizations and the students really form that connection,” Marks said.

Since the program began nine years ago, the school has raised about $33,000 for local charities,
Marks said. The program began in response to 9/11, when students raised money mainly for firefighter-related charities.

Marks explained that her students develop several business skills as they coordinate fundraising events, market their efforts and research to select recipients.

In addition to compiling change, the home and careers class baked cookies and sold them. The volunteers also organized a football throwing contest where students paid to compete against their teachers. That event went along with this year’s Clarke Penny Harvest theme, “racing to the end zone.” The students also gained support from local businesses.

Clarke’s Penny Harvest participants also received a special visit from Legislator Norma Gonsalves, who congratulated the students for their philanthropic efforts.

“The commitment made by the students to so many charitable organizations over the years demonstrates their caring and willingness to help those in need,” Gonsalves said. “They are to be congratulated for their ongoing efforts.”