



PRESENT PERFECT
Teacher Jennifer Olawski gets a happy hug.

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EVERYDAY HERO
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A caring teacher makes Christmas merrier for students

TWO YEARS AGO, Jennifer Olawski noticed something odd about one of her first-grade students in Paterson, NJ: She wasn't excited about Christmas. Jennifer knew most of the kids she taught didn't have elaborate holiday plans — 80% of her students qualified for free lunch. But she was shocked to learn that the child's family had never been able to afford to give her a holiday present. "I thought, *Maybe I can get her something*," says Jennifer, 32, who teaches physical education. And then she took it one giant step further, vowing to give all 500 children at the school a gift. "I wanted to make all of them feel special," she says. "My mom was a single mother — seeing her struggle really influenced me to want to give to others who might be struggling too."

Jennifer set up a GoFundMe page and raised \$3,000, enough to buy each student

an art set. She threw wrapping parties with her sister, friends and coworkers and took the gifts to the school, going from class to class to surprise the kids. "There was one really tough third grader whom I had never seen show any emotion," says Jennifer. "He was so overwhelmed, he just started crying. I knew I had to continue this." Last year she raised \$5,000 for slime-making kits, coloring books and hat-and-glove sets.

Showing kindness to students is second nature for Jennifer, who leads the kids in a daily pledge that begins, "I am amazing. I share, care, love and forgive." "I think if you say something often enough, you start to believe it," she says.

This year Jennifer is planning another Christmas surprise, this time for the 450 kids where she now teaches, at Livingston Elementary School in New Brunswick, NJ. An arts-and-crafts theme is likely. "A lot of homework requires colored pencils, markers or crayons," she says. "Many students don't have those."

Jennifer plans on keeping up her holiday tradition as long as she can. "I feel this is my purpose in life," she says. "If they feel cared about, my hope is they will one day pay it forward and do something nice for somebody too." —Lisa Fields
To contribute to Jennifer's 2018 gift fund, go to gofundme.com/reasonfortheseasonnb.