

On Friday, April 24, 2009, 8<sup>th</sup> grade students at Howitt Middle School held their first annual Dance Marathon benefiting the Ronald McDonald House of Long Island. Ms. Walsh and Mrs. Castellane's one hundred eleven English and social studies students collaborated on a year-long project which aimed to bridge the gap between school, home, and the community. The goal of the Dance Marathon project was to collaborate as a team to challenge students to work with their classmates to support a charitable cause. Working on this project throughout the year allowed students to engage in "real life" learning and to directly see the outcomes of their efforts. At the beginning of the school year, students researched and voted on the Ronald McDonald House of Long Island as the charity of their choice and began to educate themselves and the Howitt community about the services that the House provides. The mission of The Ronald McDonald House of Long Island is to give comfort and shelter to families experiencing the pain of having a sick child in local hospital facilities. The Howitt students organized various fundraisers throughout the year to spread awareness and generate support for the House. Ms. Walsh and Mrs. Castellane's students worked hard to brainstorm innovative and creative fundraisers which they planned and implemented. In December, students organized "Pictures with the Gingerbread Man" in the Howitt cafeteria. Four students involved in the project volunteered to wear a Gingerbread Man costume and pose with other students while they had their picture taken in front of a festive holiday backdrop created by their peers. Holiday pens were also sold to keep the holiday spirit. Since every penny counts, students collected spare change during lunch periods for the "Change for a Change" campaign. Students competed in a grade-level competition to see which grade could donate the most change. The school was able to raise \$438.71 just by throwing in a few extra coins each day. In March, students taught their classmates that, "The best place to find a helping hand is at the end of your own arm" and created the "Helping Hands Mural" in the halls of Howitt. Five hundred students and staff members placed their handprint on the wall to create a colorful reminder of how each person can make a difference. Students also hung hundreds of die-cut paper houses in the Howitt main entrance which were sponsored by members of the Farmingdale community. In addition to fundraisers, students also collected and donated thousands of dollars worth of "Wish List" items to help with the upkeep of the House. The Howitt community generously donated household supplies, toys, and food to help ease the burden for the families staying at the House. When a small group of students visited the Ronald McDonald House during the February break, they saw first hand how these generous donations directly impact families in need. As the culminating activity after a year of hard work, Ms. Walsh and Mrs. Castellane's students planned a "Kickoff Event" to reflect on the success of the year followed by a four hour Dance Marathon. Throughout the night, students celebrated their accomplishments by participating in team-building games and activities, all the while standing on their feet to show their dedication to the cause as is typical in traditional Dance Marathons. Students created a "line dance" song by writing original lyrics to reflect their support of the charity and choreographed a dance to go with it. Each hour all the students performed the line dance as they sang the

lyrics they wrote. Food was catered by the Howitt Home and Careers classes and snacks and prizes were donated by local businesses. At the end of the evening, a check for \$10,000 was presented to the Ronald McDonald House of Long Island. This incredible donation was a testament to the students' individual fundraising as well as their ability to gain support from the school and community. In addition to the substantial fundraising, students learned to think outside themselves, work cooperatively, and build character and citizenship. The students saw how their hard work can be transformed into tangible results and



realized true connections between academics and tools they will need in their lives as they applied all of the skills they learn in school each day to this real life situation. Through this experience students learned to tackle new challenges with confidence, work cooperatively with others, and think beyond themselves for the common good of the community and the world they live in.