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Local students show it's easy to be green

By Diane Carlton
The Monmouth Journal

MIDDLETOWN — A group of students from Mater Dei High School, located in the New Monmouth section of the township, have started an organization to help the environment, as well as families in need. Called HelpLightNJ, founders John Caddock and Matthew Erickson, both 16, hope to help others, help the environment and help the economy — one light bulb at a time.

Having attended separate elementary schools, the two juniors became fast friends in their freshman year. Caddock, from Atlantic Highlands, and Erickson, from Middletown, have a common goal in giving back to the community, yet each possesses a different perspective on the distribution of energy efficient light bulbs to needy families and senior citi-

zens that they began in November 2007.

Promoting both social justice and environmental awareness, Erickson said, "It's a great way to show other kids that they can tackle big issues if they believe in it."

Caddock said, "People don't know the facts about energy efficiency and global warming — you have to educate them."

Distributing compact fluorescent light bulbs, the students state that the bulbs can

use 75 percent less energy than incandescent bulbs, last 13 times longer, and give off the same amount of light.

The programs initially raised money to purchase the light bulbs themselves, but in April, Caddock and Erickson wrote a grant for the New Jersey Clean Energy Program and were approved for 60,000 bulbs manufactured by Fairfield-based

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Students John Caddock, 16, (from left) Atlantic Highlands, Matthew Erickson, 16, Middletown, and Molly Morrow, 16, volunteer their time distributing energy efficient light bulbs to needy families and senior citizens through their organization, HelpLightNJ.

Photo by Diane Carlton
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Matt Erickson, 16, of Middletown, helps distribute light bulbs provided by New Jersey Clean Energy through a program he co-founded called HelpLightNJ at one of the Keansburg Housing Authority buildings.

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company Max Lite. The students, with help from approximately 20 of their Mater Dei friends, have been working diligently to distribute the bulbs to housing authorities and senior centers throughout the state. Their deadline is to distribute all 60,000 by this Dec. 31.

The most daunting task, according to the boys, is the packaging process, which was written in the grant application, as packaging two, 23-watt bulbs and four, 15-watt bulbs in a plastic bag affixed with a Clean Energy Program sticker. Recently, volunteers spent six hours assembling 1,000 packages in the Fairfield

offices of Max Lite.

According to Caddock and Erickson, each bag, valued at \$30 retail, will last four to six years and save the recipient \$400 off their electric bill over the course of the bulb's duration.

Distributing the 1,000 packaged bags to the East Orange Housing Authority last month, the boys estimate the \$30,000 donation will save residents nearly one-half million dollars on future electric bills.

"It gets staggering, what you can do," said Erickson, "when you reach a lot of people."

Molly Morrow, 16, of Hazlet, is a fellow student and is one of the group's core vol-

unteers helping to package and distribute the bulbs. She believes the distribution process can be so much more than just delivering bulbs. Visiting the senior center of St. Ann's in Keansburg on Sept. 2, she described an elderly woman, confined to a wheelchair, who hugged her. Morrow said, "It's important because you're helping people who need it; just showing up and being there, knowing people care, makes them happy."

In helping to fight against global warming and teaching the values of energy conservation while helping the less fortunate, the students aim to create, by and large, a better earth.

Ultimately hoping to inspire other teens to take action, Erickson said, "We want to expand the program and get as many schools involved as we can."

To find out more about HelpLightNJ, visit them on the web at www.helplightnj.com.