

# BC3 students' goal: Change one more child's life with 100th Easter basket

Exec at child advocacy center lauds “phenomenal” outreach effort

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Officers of Butler County Community College's physical therapy assistant club who in 2017 helped to create 99 baskets for the Butler County Alliance for Children are shown Feb. 27, 2018, within BC3's Business and Health Professions Building. They are, from left, Andrea Ferko, treasurer, of Sarver; Jessica Palascak, vice president, of Cranberry Township; Rachel Fisher, president, of Wolcott, N.Y.; and Allison Castello, secretary, of Bethel Park.

(Butler, PA) Thirteen first-level students in Butler County Community College's physical therapy assistant club are attempting to fill 100 Easter baskets with toys and candy for the Butler County Alliance for Children, which in 2017 assisted 325 children suspected of being physically or sexually abused, according to the nonprofit organization's executive director.

First-level students in the club for those enrolled in BC3's 69-credit associate degree program are collecting donations on campus and from the community in what has become over three years the only such Easter outreach effort to comfort the victimized children, said Denna Hays, the child advocacy center's executive director.

“It has been phenomenal that the PTA Club created this program several years ago and that the tradition continues even as new members join the group,” Hays said. “We are very grateful for their project and the children it benefits through their efforts.”

The Butler County Alliance for Children, Hays said, is charged with the coordination of mandated investigators, such as law enforcement and children and youth services, throughout probes of suspected child abuse. “Most commonly, child sexual abuse,” Hays said.



Members of Butler County Community College's physical therapy assistant club create 99 baskets for the Butler County Alliance for Children in this 2017 photo.

Its services include providing a child-friendly location and trained forensic interviewers for young victims and their nonoffending caregivers. The child advocacy center's goal is to support child victims and their nonoffending caregivers as a means of reducing the amount of trauma caused by the investigative and prosecutorial processes, which, Hays says, “can be the start of the healing process.”

## Collection boxes overflowed in 2017

Rachel Fisher, Jessica Palascak, Andrea Ferko and Allison Castello were among 23 BC3 PTA Club members who in 2017 created 99 Easter baskets – roughly double the number of those in 2016, Esplen estimates – and helped with distribution at the child advocacy center at 1015 E. Jefferson St., Butler.

As first-level PTA Club members, they collected donations for a month from BC3 administrators, faculty, staff and students within BC3's Student Success Center, inside Pioneer Café and in the patio-level floor of the Business and Health Professions Building, where their program is located.



A portion of the 99 baskets created by members of Butler County Community College's physical therapy assistant club for the Butler County Alliance for Children are shown in this 2017 photo.



Within the four 4-foot by 2-foot by 2-foot collection boxes were superhero and princess coloring books, containers of 24 crayons and of blue, pink and green chalk, bubbles, jump ropes, bouncy balls, Easter bunny and action hero stickers – and candy.

“Partway through, we actually had to go through and empty the boxes and start putting the donations elsewhere because the boxes were overflowing,” said Fisher, of Wolcott, N.Y., and the PTA Club’s president. “The response was enthusiastic.”

As it was from those who received the Easter baskets, Hays said.

“On more than one occasion, we have had parents tell us that without the donation, they would not be able to provide an Easter basket for their children,” she said. “Most times, parents arrive without their children, but the few children who have come with their parents have been so very excited.”



Allison Castello, of Bethel Park, left, and Andrea Ferko, Sarver, students in Butler County Community College’s physical therapy assistant program and members of BC3’s PTA Club, are shown in 2017 distributing Easter baskets made by the club at the Butler County Alliance for Children.

## Boy “instantly started crying”

Her favorite moment, Hays said, was not from a family whose child had possibly been abused, but from one that had lost its possessions in a fire.

“The child picked an Easter basket containing a football,” Hays said. “He instantly started crying, saying the football was the only toy he had at that moment and how grateful he was for whoever donated it.”

Ferko, of Sarver, and the PTA Club’s treasurer, said, “I just could not imagine if I woke up on Easter and didn’t have a basket. I’m 27 and my mother still gets me an Easter basket.

“I have two kids of my own,” said Palascak, of Cranberry Township, the mother of boys ages 7 and 4 and the PTA Club’s vice president. “I think that was a big thing for me. Thinking about my kids waking up and not having something for Easter or for Christmas. That was a big drive for me to want to do this and to be able to make a difference for some of the kids who wouldn’t otherwise have a basket.”

Among the missions of the PTA Club is to provide community service, said Ashlee Esplen, the club’s adviser and a professor within BC3’s nursing and allied health division, adding that

projects such as the Easter basket collection instill the values her program wants to inspire in her students.

Esplen is also challenging her first-level students to make one more basket than was created in 2017, to change one more child's life this Easter.

"I like to make it competitive," Esplen said. "Beat the class prior to you with more Easter baskets."

## "We will meet the goal"

Alena Brosky, of Brockway, is among BC3's first-level PTA Club students who in late March will gather donations and fill Easter baskets with toys and candy for boys and girls ages 3 to 18.

"We will meet the goal of making 100 baskets this year by getting everyone involved and work as a team, with the thought of the children in mind," Brosky said. "It is very rewarding knowing that my class and I will be putting smiles on the faces of children going through a difficult time. To me, we aren't just giving these children an Easter basket. We are giving them the knowledge that their community cares about them."

Castello, of Bethel Park and the PTA Club's secretary, was impressed during the 2017 distribution with the thought that, "The kids probably wouldn't have been able to have Easter baskets without what we were giving to them."

Hays agreed.

"Without the PTA Club's collection, there would be 100 children that would otherwise not have an Easter basket on Easter morning," Hays said.

The moment the BC3 students realized their efforts made a difference in the life of a child is, Hays said, "priceless to me."

BC3's physical therapy assistant and nursing clubs also presented \$3,600 to the American Red Cross in October to assist victims of last fall's hurricanes; BC3's nursing club is distributing literature identifying regional treatment options available to those suffering from opioid addiction; and BC3's chapter of Phi Theta Kappa, an international academic honor society, created a five-minute video used in conjunction with the college's "Reset Your Brain: A Revolutionary Approach to Opioid Addiction & Recovery" initiative, one that promotes the successful recovery of those once addicted to opioids.



Alena Brosky, of Brockway, is a first-level student in Butler County Community College's physical therapy assistant club.

A collection point for BC3's PTA Club is located in the PTA lab on the patio-level floor of the Business and Health Professions Building. Donations will be accepted through March 26. Distribution is tentatively set for 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. March 29, Hays said.

Easter is April 1.