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TEEN FETED FOR HELPING ABUSED CHILDREN
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TAMPA - The United Way rewards a teen whose volunteer work shows a big heart and love for art.

Jennifer Sasso was flipping through a newsletter from The Spring of Tampa Bay when she noticed something that so disturbed her it would change her life.

Inside the publication from Tampa's largest shelter for battered women were paintings by children who had witnessed domestic violence. Though she was just 13 at the time, Jennifer knew she wanted to make things better.

Inspired by her own family, the south Tampa teen decided to assemble simple craft kits for wounded children.

"My younger sisters are very artsy and always making craft projects at school and at home," Jennifer explained. "I knew that a lot of kids didn't have that same kind of experience, that they didn't have a good way to express themselves."

Three years later, now 16, Jennifer has distributed 3,500 of the kits and has recruited a crew of 150 volunteers.

Friday, the Berkeley Preparatory School junior was awarded the United Way of Hillsborough County's Golden Achievement Award - the highest honor a volunteer can receive from the organization.

"I really was totally shocked," said the teen, who took home a sculptured glass trophy and a bouquet of wildflowers. "A lot of people are doing a lot of great things. I never thought I would get this award."

The judges were impressed with how heartfelt and genuine her effort has been. The craft kits are assembled inexpensively, but with a flourish of imagination: Uncle Sam dolls are made from styrofoam cups, paint, cotton and tiny, toothpick flags. There are simple wooden birdhouses, fluffy yarn dolls and cut-out animals attached to

tongue depressors.

"I like bright and cheerful things that are simple," Jennifer says. "Snowmen in the winter; butterflies and birds in the summer."

The kits are assembled by fellow Berkeley students, Gorrie Elementary School third-graders and several local Girl Scout troops. Thanks to Jennifer's dad, attorney Gary Sasso, the small charity received official nonprofit status. He and her mom, Karen, assist "with the administrative stuff," Jennifer said.

Supplies are purchased with small grants from private philanthropies and several awards, including one from Seventeen magazine and Cover Girl makeup. Jennifer recently flew to Washington to accept that award and meet first lady Laura Bush.

Jennifer, who is on Berkeley's debate team and recently starred in her school musical, "The Boyfriend," was among dozens of adult volunteers honored by the United Way at a hotel luncheon.

The event kicked off National Volunteer Week, which begins Monday. Nine individuals and groups were singled out as the top volunteers of 2000. The Michael A. Zagorc Award went to Jan Morris, a volunteer with Palm River Elementary School.

"As volunteers, we can all give as little or as much as we can," Morris said. "If everyone volunteered like this child, imagine what kind of world we would live in."

PHOTO (C)

PHIL SHEFFIELD/Tribune photo (C) **Jennifer Sasso**, a Berkeley Preparatory School student, won an achievement award Friday at a United Way luncheon honoring the top volunteers of the year.

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