

ACJC Website-Finnley Project

The Finnley Project started out as one parent's quest to do something for other parents who experienced losing their baby at birth. It has now expanded way beyond what any of us thought it could become. We are intentionally trying to spread this good news for others, including students, who are working on the Finnley Project.

Welcome to our story!

Initially, it started as dedicated weekly enrichment time for young people to engage in non-academic learning experiences at the Allen County Juvenile Center (ACJC). Miss Sandy, one of our Fort Wayne Community Schools (FWCS)-appointed teachers, took her passion for knitting and began teaching the time-honored tradition to students at the ACJC. As early as January, 2020 students began creating winter hats using looms, but quickly found that knitting also helped them to calm their anxieties, to relieve their stress, to focus on something positive, and to give back to their community. Over the past year, the knitting practice has grown into a well-established program within the juvenile justice center that is supported by FWCS employees and Allen County Juvenile Probation and ACJC administration. Probation Officer Cheryl Bartnick noticed the kids knitting and was then taught by those students how to knit winter hats. Officer Bartnick incorporated the knitting into her MRT program, where the kids are required to give 20 service hours back to their community. In detention, students are limited in the types of items they may use for creative projects; therefore the knitting was a perfect fit. Seeing the outcome of learning a new skill was something the kids very much enjoyed, as did Officer Bartnick.

During the 2020-2021 school year, ACJC students have been involved in semester-long knitting projects that have supported the FWCS Clothing Bank, Lutheran South Unity School, and M.I.S.F.I.T.S. Ministry, Inc. In late January of 2021, Ms. Sandy was contacted by Ms. Jessie, a fellow FWCS employee, who had heard about how the students at ACJC were knitting to benefit various causes. She wondered if they would be willing to help her honor her infant son, Finnley, who she lost in October 2020. Ms. Jessie had hoped to donate infant hats and "cocoon" of all sizes for babies who were stillborn or may have lived for just a short time after birth. Hospitals traditionally have a supply of average infant-sized hats, but are always in need of smaller (golf ball-sized) and larger-than-average infant hats. Ms. Sandy instantly agreed to help Ms. Jessie and her cause. Ms. Sandy and Ms. Jessie posted information on Facebook about the Finnley Project and asked for supplies to be donated by setting up an Amazon Wish List. Family and friends of the cause came through, and the project started to receive donated baby yarn for the cocoons and hats. Ms. Cheryl started having her MRT kids making cocoons and hats as well.

In wanting to share the Finnley Project story with the community, we desired to convey to how impactful this has become to the kids, Ms. Jessie, Ms. Sandy, and Ms. Cheryl. Ms. Cheryl reached out to Channel 55 Fox News and Channel 15 WANE TV, who eagerly sent reporters to ACJC to film our story. After the broadcasts, the Finnley Project really took off, with

people from the Fort Wayne area making generous donations from the Amazon Wish List. The additional resources ensure the knitting project will also create opportunities for Ms. Cheryl to knit with students while having meaningful discussions. The Finnley Project has also helped Ms. Jessie work through the grieving process, giving her solace that her son's life had meaning. Seeing the positive effects of knitting on her students, Ms. Sandy has also seen a reduction in behavioral issues in the classroom. Knitting helps to sooth students by allowing them to focus on something positive, instead of festering on negative things going on in their lives. A student in Ms. Sandy's class drew a logo for the Finnley Project which will now be used to print shirts celebrating this cause. The project's coordinators hope to give a shirt to every student who learns to make, and then completes, a cocoon and hat.

As a result of the Finnley Project's positive outcomes, Ms. Sandy, Ms. Jessie, and Ms. Cheryl are collaborating with other agencies to create Finnley Projects in their facilities. In April 2021, an agency in Bowling Green, Ohio inquired about starting The Finnley Project. Ms. Jessie and Ms. Sandy will be assisting them to help launch their program. In May 2021, Ms. Cheryl and Ms. Sandy taught the kids at the Youth Service Center (YSC) how to knit.

The project's leaders envision the skills learned through knitting will be a tangible reminder – through hats and cocoons – of the love and care that the youth served at ACJC show to grieving families and loved ones. This is the legacy that Finnley will leave. The Finnley Project has not only allowed for cross-departmental collaboration at the juvenile center. Indeed, the outcomes from the project continue to shed light to the good works done at ACJC, knowing that the heart of ACJC's mission is to rehabilitate and to empower our youth for better works in the community.

If you would like more information, donate or follow us on FB: [The Finnley Project](#).