



CATHOLIC COMMUNITY SERVICES

providing help. creating hope. Christmas, 2006

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Community Comes Together for Christmas Celebrates Record-Breaking Year

Written by Wendy Hellinger, Program Coordinator

On December 23, at the Catholic Community Services Christmas site, a tiny wizened grandmother stands amidst an impressive stack of wrapped packages, a new bicycle, and a huge stuffed teddy bear destined to be Christmas presents for the four grandchildren and one disabled child of a friend she is rearing on Social Security income and Food Stamps. She has no money for Christmas gifts; there isn't even money enough for basic necessities. As she struggles to open the rusty back gate of the ancient pickup truck, however, she can hardly see through her tears of joy. As she yanks at the truck latch and directs the loading of the precious gifts for her family, she keeps repeating, "Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Almighty Jesus. Somebody *cares* for us!"

INDEED DONORS DO CARE!

This year, donors from throughout the Greater Baton Rouge area and from as far away as California, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, New York and Canada, came together in an unprecedented outpouring of generosity, hope, and love. Donors sacrificed to provide merry

Christmas for 1,311 families—nearly 6,000 individuals—who, like the grandma in her old truck, would otherwise not have had a single gift at Christmas.

DONORS BROUGHT CHRISTMAS TO SO MANY IN NEED. . .

like the seniors trying to make ends meet with high prices on their medications and high utility bills. At least 300 other seniors, including grandparents and great-grandparents raising their grandchildren, were helped to have a merry Christmas this year. A number of families, including at least one family with an infant who had been sleeping on the floor, were enabled through the Christmas project to get the beds they needed. One family of eight who had spent several months last year living in an abandoned car enjoyed Christmas in their own apartment this year, including a Christmas tree and Christmas goodies brought by donors. Another mother asked for a playpen to keep the bugs away from her baby while he slept—and she was helped not only to keep her baby safe from pests but was also helped to find a more secure and sanitary apartment by a donor who had transportation and sacrificed the time and skills to advocate for the client in her search for more healthy housing.

"THE FAMILIES REALLY TOUCHED ME," one donor wrote. "The Mom wants to give her children a better education. To practice what she preaches, she has enrolled herself in an adult education course, and all she wanted her children to have for Christmas were books, school supplies, and educational toys. She wants the same things for her children as I want for my own children. We're both moms trying to do our best."



Community Response Unprecedented

The families who apply for help through the Community Comes Together for Christmas program are among the poorest in the community. They're subsisting at or below the federal poverty level and receiving Food Stamps. Many come from backgrounds of generational poverty and at least twenty-five percent are evacuated from storm-affected areas as a result of the 2005 hurricanes. Many are filled with doubts about the future and are uncertain that anyone cares about their plight.

But donors let these families know in no uncertain terms just how much they do care. Churches, including several local and distant Catholic and non-Catholic churches, sponsored families and donated gifts. Public, private, and parochial elementary, middle and high schools took on the Community Comes Together for Christmas program as a school project; U.S. Postal Service employees bought gifts for at least 200 children; Entergy donated funds to provide gifts for seniors and families in need; Bell South Pioneers, Louisiana State University, fraternities, sororities, social organizations, clubs and RENEW groups, business owners and countless others called upon friends and associates to sacrifice giving each other gifts in order to donate to the Christmas program. Individuals and families adopted whole families, sponsored individual seniors and children, and dropped off gift cards by the hundreds that could be used to purchase clothing, food and gifts.



One mother whom we called near Christmas to invite her to shop with a volunteer using donated gift cards expressed her appreciation for being able to get as gifts what most of us think of as everyday items: deodorant, bathroom tissue, laundry detergent, soap. "I can't buy these with food stamps," she explained, noting that her minimum-wage salary at a local cafeteria barely enables her to pay the rent (which has doubled in the past 18 months), let alone purchase household products.

Many parents asked for such basics as underwear, socks, and pajamas for their children. "We get our clothes from St. Vincent de Paul," one mother of four explained, "but they need their own underwear. They outgrow everything so fast!"

We realize that in times of tragedy, Hurricane Katrina last year, the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, the World Trade Center attacks in 2001, donors are asked to open their hearts and their wallets to those in need. But it isn't just during those crisis times that families want for what most of us think of as basics—this happens every day, right here in our own community. Thanks to donors to the Community Comes Together for Christmas 2006 project, some of these needs have been met . . . and some extra-special lagniappe treasures are in the hands of children and their families for Christmas this year, too.

"Many are filled with doubts about the future and are uncertain that anyone cares about their plight."

Unexpected Blessings



Ten families received Pentium III computers, including modems and monitors, through the generosity of donors and a program through the Capital Area Recycling Council. Through the generosity of the Mall at Cortana Kiwanis Club, these ten families also received food baskets for the holidays.

"Do they have a Playstation?" asked one donor on the telephone, discussing another family one day. I offered to call the family and find out. No Playstation.

"But they do have a television?" the donor persisted. I called back the family. Yep. They have a television.

"Well . . . I'm going to go ahead and get them a Playstation 2," said the donor. "I think the children will all enjoy it. I got an 8 year old of my own and he thinks his Playstation is the greatest."

I don't have to describe the children's reaction to that Christmas gift of love!

Blessings came unexpectedly. Two professional men called the Agency separately during the last few days before Christmas, each asking what he could do help. These men not only provided a total of 75 frozen turkeys ("You mean he's really shopping and bringing the frozen birds?" one harried staff member asked in disbelief and gratitude—imagining herself not having to do another

"turkey run" to the local market). These turkeys went directly into the hands and refrigerators of families in need to be enjoyed for Christmas dinner. Each of these heroes also made a substantial donation to the Christmas project. One of them, seeing how great the need, in addition to the turkeys, delivered directly to the Christmas site 100 gift cards worth \$30 each, to be given to applicant families who had not been specifically selected for sponsorship by other donors.



Catholic Community Services Extends Thanks for Miracles

Words fail in trying to express our gratitude to donors for generosity like this. The most important message of this newsletter, in fact, is to try to tell you, our donors, how much we appreciate your generosity. Without your help, these needy families would not have a merry Christmas. Their happiness is the direct result of your thoughtfulness and your willingness to sacrifice to help others. You, our donors, have been an extended family for these children, seniors, and adults in need, all creations of a loving God who are precious . . . and for whom you have so deeply and generously cared.

“Many families in our diocese are walking a tightrope, hoping to have enough just to make it through the month,” said Daniel J. Palka, LCSW, Director of Emergency Assistance programs at CCS. “Emergency assistance cases are becoming more complex. People are no longer simply delinquent with one bill or in need of food. They are delinquent with several bills, need food, clothing and medication, are in danger of foreclosure or eviction, or are homeless.” This is a year-round problem that, if anything, only increases at the holidays.

“Dear God, it is Christmas Eve. Help me through this difficult time. Happy Birthday.”



Recently, a nun told me a story about a child who left a note on the altar last Christmas that read, “Dear God, it is Christmas Eve. Help me through this difficult time. Happy Birthday.” She didn’t know which child left the note—it could have been any one of them. In addition to poverty, some have absent or abusive parents, loveless homes. She pointed out that several of the adults and seniors at Mass could have written that note as well—they had expressed the same despair in conversations with her. But God has a special place in His heart for the suffering. And every Christmas, with the help of donations from caring supporters like you, each child, adult, and senior is able to receive a token of God’s love and some direct evidence of His caring that will help them make it through “this difficult time.” Your gifts are profound reminders that God loves each of the families in need and that another human being—you—also cares for them. Once someone starts believing that he or she is not alone and is loved, miracles can happen.

You, our donors, have not only heard the cries of the poor, but you have answered with compassion. On behalf of the nearly 6,000 children, seniors, and adults who were touched by your love this holiday season, thank you! As the grandma with the pickup truck expressed it so eloquently: “Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Almighty Jesus. Someone cares!” Thank you for caring and sharing.