

From the desk of Wendy Hellinger, Program Coordinator

The Hands of Many Celebrate the Birth of One

The Greater Baton Rouge area joined hands this holiday season, the strong and weak, the old and the young, the privileged and the needy, to make a circle of love that is unprecedented in the history of the Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Baton Rouge (CCDBR) Community Comes Together for Christmas project. This year, 1,285 families were enabled to have a merry Christmas thanks to scores of donors who

Dozens of staff members and volunteers at CCDBR undertook the logistics of distributing thousands of gifts, and local media supported the project with television, radio, and print coverage. As a result, donors fulfilled the Christmas wishes of nearly 5,000 children, seniors, and adults of all faiths throughout the 12 civil-parish area of the Diocese of Baton Rouge. Donations from individuals, schools, churches, businesses, clubs and fraternal organizations in Baton Rouge, throughout Louisiana,



Ian and Alex Abel, pictured with their father former CCDBR Board Chair Leo Abel, donated their "Angel

across the United States (including Idaho and Virginia) and Canada communicated in the most tangible way the true spirit of Christmas.

"The Greater Baton Rouge area is really made up of a bunch of small communities and it's not hard to hear or find out about someone in need, because everyone knows someone who's out of work, or sick, or having trouble of some kind," a CCDBR caseworker explains. "A lot of people are one paycheck away from homelessness, one car repair away from having no transportation and losing their livelihoods. But in this community, more people care about you than you really know. It's hard to explain but when something happens, everyone tries to get involved and help. God is holding all of us in the palm of His hand, just as neighbors are also reaching out to support each other with helping hands. We are all called to be the helping hands of God in the world."

This is especially true at Christmas, and never before has CCDBR had so many helping hands come together to support families and seniors in need. This year, the hands of caring in The Community Comes Together for Christmas 2007 program brought Christmas cheer to more than 1,285 households, including nearly 4,600 children, seniors, and adults living in poverty. In addition, more than 1,000 children received toys through toy giveaway programs with which CCDBR partnered.



Smiles shine as bright as Christmas lights filled at the distribution center.



VolunTeen and his dad give Catholic Charities staff a helping hand.

Donors rise to meet increased needs

Community Comes Together for Christmas project begins each year in late October, when families living at or below the federal poverty level qualify for the project. This year, about one-third were displaced from New Orleans; about 85 percent included at least one child under 12 years old. This year, Catholic Charities saw a 40% increase in the number of seniors seeking Christmas assistance, especially seniors in surrounding rural parishes. Seniors have been particularly hard hit by rent increases, prices of prescription medications, and high energy costs. Without the assistance of the CCDBR Christmas project, these seniors and families would have nothing special for Christmas.

For some of the families in need, life has taken a sudden turn for the worse; others have been in need for a long time. Whether the reason is illness, unemployment, advancing age, bad judgment or just bad luck, these families and seniors are living difficult and uncomfortable lives. Too often, the children and parents struggling to make ends meet for their families suffer the consequences. Children wear clothes too small, too tattered, too lightweight for the weather. Teens face shunning when showers don't work because the water is disconnected and toiletries aren't available. Parents divvy precious dollars to provide food on the table and a roof over the family's head, but no gifts under the tree. A senior must make a decision about whether to pay the rising rent or buy medicine and groceries, never mind Christmas.

Some of those in need require a brief helping hand to lift them up; others' situations are far more complex and a strong, steady hand is needed. Some need only the gentle touch of caring and the reassurance that their lives matter.

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So many are in need of helping hands...

The annual Applicants were as diverse as donors. From the lonely 17-year old refugee from Cuba, spending her first Christmas alone in the U.S. and separated from her mother (who is still in Cuba) to the 78-year old widow who performed a surprisingly agile happy dance around the stack of gifts she'd received for Christmas, glowing with delight and gratitude; to the 11-year old donor who was so profoundly moved by a family's dire living situation that he recruited additional adult donors to perform an "extreme home makeover" for his adopted Christmas family, to the Hindu family who adopted one of the last households in need for a holiday that is not even in their religious tradition because, as the donor noted, "helping others is in every tradition," this year's Christmas project crossed generations and

ethnicities to bring joy to the hearts of givers and receivers alike.

The joy of the season knew no bounds as donors and applicant families discovered commonalities they'd never dreamed. A donor mom and an applicant mom shared their concerns over their children's tastes in music, fashion, and friends. A donor mom and an applicant mom shared hopes for their toddlers, comparing child-rearing strategies for getting the toddlers to bath and bed.

This sharing would never have occurred without this Christmas project and the chance for donors and families in need to join hands; the sharing is at least as important as the gift-giving and it is the sharing that will be remembered by all forever—long past the end of the holiday season.





Inmates unload wooden toys from Hunt Correctional.



LSU Swim Team with Mike the Tiger at Christmas party with their "adopted" child

Stories of help and hope abound . . .

Donors are always amazing, but never more than this year. First and foremost, Commercial Properties donated the use of the CCDBR Christmas site, a storefront in Lake Sherwood Mall. Staff and volunteers at the site organized and distributed an estimated 5,000 gifts from Thanksgiving to Christmas Eve. These helping hands are the hand-up that makes all the rest of the project possible.

Other caring hands came right behind. The caring hands of those in the Mail Handlers Union proved that they really do deliver, bringing holiday gifts to more than 250 children and families, fulfilling children's sugarplum dreams including at least one computer. Forty additional families received Pentium III computers through the Capital Area Corporate Recycling Council Computers discount program, thanks to donors' generosity.

The LSU student athletes joined hands that usually throw footballs and baseballs and swing golf clubs to support dozens of children in need with gifts and a magical party including Mike the Tiger and Santa Claus. Prisoners from Elayn Hunt Correctional Institution handcrafted 75 wooden rocking horses and rocking chairs and donated them to families with young children—for whom these will

become heirlooms.

Elementary students Ian and Alex saved a portion of their allowance and then opened their hands to donate it, a surprisingly high stack of sometimes-crumpled dollar bills, to benefit those in need. A donor, who underwent an emergency cardiac procedure, was so concerned about fulfilling the dreams of his Christmas family in need that he sent a friend to CCDBR with hands full of a sizeable donation to ensure that the family would have a merry Christmas even as he spends his own holiday recuperating.

Staff at many businesses, including the Neuromedical Center, Our Lady of the Lake College, City-Parish Government, the Sheriff's Office, and so many more, held out their hands to help those in need with gifts and a spirit of caring this holiday season. Parishioners at several area churches, including St. Joseph Cathedral, Most Blessed Sacrament, Our Lady of Mercy, St. Theresa of Avila, and Allen Chapel opened their hands and hearts, donating gifts and toys for dozens of families. Wal-mart and family foundations provided generous grants to assist those in need, enabling many more families to have happy holidays.



View more pictures at www.ccdibr.org
Where caring people click!

Christmas magic thanks to donors

Individuals, families, seniors, and students, from elementary through college, opened their hands and their hearts to make Christmas magical for those in need. Every day, beginning as early as mid-October, donors appeared, sent donations, or contacted specific families in need to lend helping hands to those who would otherwise have nothing at all for Christmas. Donors appeared with toys, bicycles, furniture, clothing, and baskets filled with basic household supplies—bathroom tissue, laundry detergent, shampoo, deodorant, cleaning products—that will enable families and seniors to have happy holidays and live in dignity. Donations came in every day,



enabling CCDBR to meet not only the gift needs of families but also more of their basic needs, such as helping a new mother to get her water turned back on after it was shut off for non-payment, or securing a bed for a grandmother raising her young grandson orphaned by a car accident who has been sleeping on the floor for months. A person with disabilities received a winter coat that she desperately needed, and she could hardly contain her grateful tears.

A Hospice patient got help with his December utility bills, plus a bracket to hold a book that will enable him to read independently, and a soft blanket that reminds him how much others care.



Survivor family and former residents of Lafitte Housing Project in New Orleans pose with their new bicycles

Christmas by the numbers

- 1,285 families and seniors adopted (nearly 5,000 individuals)
- 40% more seniors assisted this year than last year
- 706 children received Toys for Tots in collaboration among CCDBR, Southern University St. Joseph Chapel, and the U.S. Marine Corps
- 400 children received toys through collaboration with Allen Chapel and Rep. Regina Barrow's programs
- 200 volunteers gave of their time and talents over a 3 week period.
- +600 children received toys through collaboration with Most Blessed Sacrament, Our Lady of Mercy, St. Joseph's Cathedral, St. Theresa of Avila, St. Joseph's Academy, and other churches and schools with "giving trees" for toys
- 100 handmade Christmas cards went to homebound seniors receiving Meals on Wheels in collaboration with Capital Area Agency on Aging
- \$600 in new toys, from a donor who came to us through the YMCA, went to the Dedicated Dads project at Family Road. The Dedicated Dads project encourages fathers' involvement in their children's lives; they're working hard to unite families, increase incidence of marriage among parents, and build healthy children and families.
- Cash donations, including gift cards, exceeding \$45,000







providing help. creating hope.

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Thumbs up from a St. Jean Vianney Weblo



Donors with overflowing stockings and hearts!



Deacon Esnard Gremillion and wife Peggy volunteered long hours but still manage a smile.

Thanks to donors, volunteers, staff, and the media,

Thousands of individuals living in poverty in the greater Baton Rouge area enjoyed the best of Christmas this year. Although the day-to-day challenges of life for these families and seniors remain, the encouragement and love they feel as a result of the Christmas project will also remain. A merry Christmas has brought hope to these families and seniors, and optimism for a brighter New Year.

Donors of all faiths witnessed the truth of the verse taken from 1 Timothy 1:14: "And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus."

Like Christ's love, the generosity of all who participated in the Community Comes Together for Christmas 2007 project was exceedingly abundant.

And just as God names the stars, He knows the names of each donor and volunteer who made this holiday project possible. On behalf of all the families and seniors to whom donors opened their hands and hearts this holiday season, and from all of us at CCDBR, I thank God

for each and every person who offered a helping hand for this year's Christmas project, without whom this would not be possible. May God continue to open His hands in blessing to you all throughout the New Year.



Just one of the thousands of children touched by Community Comes Together for Christmas.