

Generous donors once again help Holiday Project fulfill wishes

Fulfilling the wishes of children in need at the holidays became a more successful process in 2015, thanks to changes made to the Department of Human Services (DHS) [Holiday Project](#) operation and generous donations of goods and money.

The Office of Community Relations (OCR) early in 2015 secured a space for the Holiday Project Workshop in Forest Hills, optimizing storage and time considerations that had become issues at the Human Services Building (HSB), Downtown, where the Workshop had been held. Workshop volunteers yearly pack hundreds of bags with donated toys, clothing, books, stuffed animals and more to fulfill wish lists sent to Holiday Project organizers by DHS caseworkers.

The Forest Hills space also proved its worth in another way: People coming to the shop could see the Project at work. That wasn't always possible at the HSB and getting a firsthand look encourages donors and sponsors, said Ondréa Burton, Manager of the OCR Event and Donations Team who oversees the Holiday Project. "People could see that they were contributing to something that really benefits kids," Ondréa said.



The use of KidBoost, a software application that, among other things, tracks needs, wishes and inventory, assisted in helping to ensure all children received gifts. With the software, it is possible to see at a glance what wishes are outstanding so that sponsors can be contacted to ask if they could help, which many did.

Also new this year to the Project was the use of gift boxes, topped with Holiday Project stickers, for teens, as an added touch to let the children know they are special. The boxes were stocked with hand bags, perfume, jewelry, hats, socks, belts, books and more.

The Holiday Project really wouldn't be possible with the many individuals and organizations that sponsor children, hold office drives, provide donations and volunteer to help fill children's wish lists. Among the key groups who deserve special mention include UPMC, PNC Bank, ERT, Home Depot, Wells Fargo, Centimark, CityCo Credit Union, Jones Day, and Strassburger McKenna Gutnick & Gefsky.

Shoes, a haircut and a remote-control car

Home Depot of Greater Pittsburgh employees, this year, demonstrated the type of exceptional acts of kindness seen often with the Holiday Project. The employees sponsored 20 children, giving bicycles to all as part of their gifts. When an employee delivered the bikes, he arranged to set them up at the Forest Hills workshop and told Ondréa that he and his colleagues were dedicated to doing anything they could to make the lives of Project recipients better.

One sponsored child, a six-year-old boy, had asked for shoes, a request that the Home Depot employee found especially touching. “The employee told me he had never done without. For him, it was hard to comprehend that there were children who, through no fault of their own, were in these circumstances,” Ondréa said.

He asked Ondréa to make sure that the boy had received his shoes and also wanted to know if he needed or wanted anything else. When she relayed the caseworker’s confirmation that the boy had received the shoes but hadn’t been able to get a haircut he needed because of lack of money, the Home Depot employee not only got him a gift certificate for the barber in his neighborhood, but also got him clothing and the remote-control car he had wanted.

“It’s beautiful how many people contribute to making the Holiday Project a success, and the generosity and kindness people show is remarkable,” Ondréa said.

Donor remembers ILI youth with hundreds of gift bags



Cortez Carey, education liaison for the Independent Living Initiative, shows gifts donated to participants of that program.

Separately from the Holiday Project, Sue Gove, a member of the Children, Youth & Families Advisory Board, donated 200 filled gift bags filled with a variety of items, including pajamas, blankets, towels and stuffed animals, for older teens and younger adults who participate in the DHS Independent Living Initiative (ILI). Sue has made a similar donation for several years. The youth who received them were, as always, delighted with the presents.