

Effort shares Christmas spirit

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It takes a concentrated and coordinated effort to bring Christmas to 200 children.

They arrive in shifts, loading up on pizza and sweets before caroling at high volume.

Next there's a visit to Santa Claus, who asks about school, their behavior and their Christmas wishes.

Then comes the best part.

Kiwanis Club "elves" lead them out to an open area and hand them a plastic sack full of individually wrapped presents — presents they requested through wish lists earlier in the year.

"It's like a dream come true," 6-year-old Keyuana cries, grinning and ripping wrapping paper off a High School Musical 3 sticker book. Remote-controlled cars whiz underfoot and razor scooters cruise by.

That was the scene Sunday afternoon at the Minges Unit of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Pitt County on Fire Tower Road. It's been about a decade since they began their Project Santa program, dedicated to making Christmas wishes reality for some of the area's most needy and deserving children. Local Kiwanis Clubs quickly got involved.

"It's not just random gifts. We found out exactly what that child wanted and what they needed," explained University City Kiwanis Club President Will Sneed. "For some of them, this may be the only Christmas they get."

Sneed's organization oversees the fundraising and the gift-presentation portions of the event. They raised around \$20,000 this year to ensure each child's satchel held \$100 worth of goodies.

The goodies themselves are purchased and wrapped by a team of women from the Greater Greenville Kiwanis Club. And there's nothing lacking. There are batteries for every gadget, helmets for every bike.

"We try to fulfill every wish," Dawn Broome said of her fellow shoppers. "We put a lot of thought into it."

By the time everything arrives at the site, Broome said she's just hoping every box has been ticked and everyone is in place. But she and the volunteers get plenty out of the experience, too.

"Once I get here and see the smiling faces and the paper flying and the jubilee," Broome said, "everything it took to put it together just melts away."

They have remarkable memories — Kiwanis moments, Broome calls them — of years past: Weeping grateful mothers, a 9-year-old who had never had her own doll to play with before.

Sneed recalled a young girl who stopped opening her presents halfway through. He thought she was saving some for Christmas morning, which many children do. But she quickly corrected him. The remaining gifts were for her little sister, she said.

"It's a phenomenal community thing," Sneed said. "We're just blessed to give it out."

Like many other nonprofit and charity groups hurting under current economic conditions, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Pitt County are hoping to trim budgets without cutting back on services during the next fiscal year. But this Project Santa was as much a success as those held during more prosperous years.

"I was a little nervous, to be honest, when we first sent out the letters (requesting donations)," said Executive Director Jay Faron. "But for the most part, the names are the same. There are still generous people out there, even in these times."