

Birmingham News (AL)

Goodness comes in all faiths

December 25, 2005

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News columnist Kathy Kemp

There is joy in Sumiton this Christmas morning.

Children are opening gifts of unimaginable splendor, while their parents and guardians say thanks to God and to those who do his work.

Sumiton, in Walker County, is a largely Christian community, filled with Christmas trees on this holiest day of the year. Although there are residents with means, many subsist in the kind of poverty that teaches children not to hope for a visit from Santa Claus.

But not today, thanks to some unseen friends, particularly within Birmingham's Jewish community. Members of Temple Emanu-El teamed with members of South Highland Presbyterian Church to provide holiday gifts and food to 550 of Sumiton's poorest and youngest residents.

The project was the brainchild of Temple Emanu-El member Susan Swartz. She is a volunteer with the nonprofit RUSH Initiative, an outreach program that has brought library books, a food pantry and free medical and mental-health care to Sumiton Elementary/ Junior High School children. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the town's per capita income is \$15,086, with 17 percent of the population below the poverty line.

"Through the programs we run, we have had remarkable access to the lives of children in the community," Swartz says. "We have seen in aching detail what it means to be poor. Most of these kids are very much loved, but when it comes to buying food or Christmas presents, that's not much of a choice."

Swartz wanted to do more this season for her adopted community. She came up with the holiday gift program and enlisted the church and her synagogue to carry it out. Working with principal Deborah Peake and clinic administrator Tammy Goodwin, Swartz put together a list of needy families, and all were invited to apply. Emanu-El's Rabbi Scott Hausman-Weiss and Nancy Collier, director of South Highland Presbyterian's children's ministries, organized toy drives and fund-raisers. Temple and church members, Swartz among them, hit the malls in droves on Black Friday.

"This has been a great thing for us," South Highland minister, the Rev. Ed Hurley, says. "It's what the season is all about. It's been rewarding working together with the synagogue, on this and other things. I think it's important to keep those doors open."

Last Sunday, a posse of trucks and SUVs made the 35-minute drive from Birmingham to the school in Sumiton. Parents arrived all last week to pick up the gifts, which ranged from winter coats and bags of food to dolls and televisions.

"One woman told me all she could have afforded for her kids was a new pair of socks," Swartz says. "I asked another woman what size she wore, and she said 6, and I said, 'That's nice.' Then she told me, 'It's the cancer.' She and her husband were caring for three grandchildren."

A South Highlands youth group sang Christmas carols in the woman's front yard, and one by one, the kids went in to say hello. "The truth of it is, we all get more out of this than the people we help," Swartz says.

Tonight, the celebration of Hanukkah begins. Menorahs will be lighted, gifts will be opened and prayers will be said. Good people, no matter their faith, aren't that different after all.

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