

Toys For Tots

GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

It was an overcast morning in Wesley Chapel on Saturday, December 15th. While it was not the kind of day most would like to get up early and go to school, Toys for Tots “elves” were hard at work at Wesley Chapel Elementary School, distributing toys and Christmas cheer to local needy families.

When Focus Magazine arrived on the scene, head elf Bob Loring was already on his way to one of the four other distribution centers in Pasco County, but had left the location in the capable hands of Sue Hilton and Anna Fulk, veterans of many previous Toys for Tots events. The inside of the cafeteria resembled a Toys R Us, and was busy with families and volunteers, many of whom invariably made their way to Hilton for help.

Under any other circumstances, one may have become frazzled with the constant questions and requests, but Hilton reassured many, “This is what we do.” When asked why she chose this particular program, she responded, “Right here, right now. When we open the door at 8:00 am and the first person walks in, the look on their faces is something you can’t pay for.” Her statement would be hard to dispute, as “shoppers” and elves alike had bright smiles on their faces, and some even had tears of overwhelming gratitude.



Baez and Christina Gonzalez stand behind a mountain of board games

Fulk, despite many years of service to the program, also became teary-eyed with emotion at one point. When asked why she participated in Toys for Tots, she said simply, “This is my joy.” Families, standing in the long line outside the cafeteria, greeted and even hugged Fulk, as she hurried around making sure everyone was as comfortable as possible, helping in whatever way she could.

Both women could not say enough good things about the community that made this possible for families with children who otherwise may have not received Christmas presents, children primarily selected for the program by school teachers and counselors who are familiar with the kids’ situations. Local businesses have been very helpful in contributing storage space and monetary donations. Fulk noted Metro Storage and Toyota as big contributors, and said the

new Toys R Us allowed the program to buy two thousand dollars worth of toys to donate.

Toys for Tots was started sixty years ago by the US Marine Corps, and their official website, www.toysfortots.org, lists their goal as bringing hope to needy children, so they may “grow into responsible, productive, patriotic citizens and community leaders.” When Focus caught up with head elf and former marine Bob Loring on the phone, he confirmed that the experience can have quite the impact on a child, saying, “The million dollar moment for me...is when a person comes back with a kid and a toy under his arm and says here’s my pay back,” noting that many a Marine trace their first experience with the Corps back to being a Toys for Tots recipient.

While the Marines represent Toys for Tots, Loring has taken it upon himself to coordinate with local faith-based charities as well to provide a 30 pound box of food for families who receive toy donations. John Strickland was in charge of food distribution at the Wesley Chapel site, and informed Focus that they hoped to reach out to 1700 families that day. He commended all the volunteers for giving back to their community and said, “This is a good country we live in.”



Volunteers Nancy Carpenter and Dana Scranton