

Christmas Gifts for Union County Kids

By Helina Bailey

'Twas a few days before Christmas, on a chilly evening, when a local family showed up at the Union County Farmers Market Pavilion like Santa Clause. They backed up their truck and dropped down the tail gate, revealing bags upon bags of toys, coats, bicycles, and more. For this generous family donated nearly \$500 worth of goodies to children in the community who needed a delivery from Santa Clause.

In the beginning of the month, I searched for local programs that helped families in need with gifts for Christmas and I came up empty handed. Most of the programs in the area had already distributed their gifts, leaving families who are down on their luck without a place to get help in December. Knowing that misfortune or unexpected bills often come as an unwanted surprise, I wondered what the families would do if they suddenly found themselves in a bind and had not signed up for Under the Tree/Toys for Tots/etc. during the fall registration period, which is usually September through November 1st.

Thus, a last-minute Union County Toy Drive was born, with the goal of providing children who did not receive assistance from other Christmas programs with gifts. Mayor Bailey opened his office to donations and a sign-up form was released on Facebook. After many shares and much enthusiasm from the general public, I was sure the toy drive would be a success. Solid Rock Realty of Corryton reached out as soon as I published the Walmart Wishlist with the gifts for the first family who signed up. They purchased all the items on the list. Then, a friend from college who lives in Sacramento purchased a bike for the toy drive. Shortly afterwards, a local resident, Shirlee Grabko, sent funds via paypal to contribute to the cause.

When Sandy Hopper of Stormee Enterprises delivered bags of gifts to the Mayor's office, I was encouraged to believe that the community was on board with this toy drive. Unfortunately, Miss Sandy would be the only Union County resident to deliver gifts to Mayor Bailey's office (Solid Rock Realty delivered their items they purchased from the wish list to this location). As my friends across the nation continued to support my toy drive for Union County children, sending gifts from Georgia and Oak Ridge, locals continued to share news of the program.

As I feared the children on my list would not be receiving any gifts this Christmas as there were too many for me to personally purchase for, I prayed that God would send help. And HE did! A local family, who wishes to stay anonymous, purchased all the remaining items, including two bicycles, and coats to ensure the children were taken care of. With a total of eight people, myself and my sister included, the Union County Christmas Toy Drive was able to provide gifts, meals, and coats for twenty-four children. In addition to the gifts, families were surprised with a large family meal to take home. The meals were donated by Leanah Nau, my sister and owner of Mama Lana's Kitchen & Catering. As stressful as the toy drive was, having no experience in such an endeavor, it was a roaring success. It is my intention to make this an annual event, catching the overflow from programs such as Under the Tree, to ensure families who miss the deadline for local programs find hope and faith in their community. As the saying goes, it takes a village! Next year's toy drive will start earlier, have more visibility, and hopefully have more

community participation. If you would like to sponsor this program next year, please contact Helina Bailey at HelinaBailey1@gmail.com

Merry Christmas!