

St. Vincent de Paul Georgia supports Clark's Christmas Kids

By: Andrew Nelson / The Georgia Bulletin

Despite an unusual blast of snow during prime shopping days, Clark's Christmas Kids gift drive fulfilled the Christmas wishes of thousands of children living in foster care.

Snowfall on Friday, Dec. 8, set back the gift-buying tradition. But with a boost in online giving and volunteer shoppers stepping in, the more than 27,000 gift requests were fulfilled.

Consumer advocate Clark Howard, of WSB Radio, has teamed for 27 years with the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services to share gifts with young people in foster care. St. Vincent de Paul Georgia has contributed its logistical expertise to make it happen for the past three years.



(L-R) John Berry, executive director of St. Vincent de Paul Georgia, Donna Pettigrew-Jackson, special initiatives administrator and Secret Santa project director for the Georgia Department of Family and Children's Services, and WSB radio consumer reporter Clark Howard attend the sixth and final collection day of toys for foster children at the Marietta Walmart store location. Photo: Michael Alexander

SVdP coordinates volunteers and helps to collect and distribute the presents.

SVdP chief executive officer John Berry said that kids living away from their families “need the face of Christ” during this time of their lives, in keeping with the mission of St. Vincent de Paul.

He said after the snowstorm a groundswell of donors and shoppers flooded the participating Walmart stores to make up for lost time.

“People just poured in,” he said.

It takes some 350 volunteers to make the gift drive happen for the approximately 9,000 boys and girls in foster care in Georgia. Three years ago, the number of participating children was about 7,500, Berry said.

During the drive, shoppers drop by the stores where cards list three gift request items for each foster child from infants to 17-year-olds.

Clark Howard's drive was set to take place at 10 stores in metropolitan Atlanta between Nov. 30 and Dec. 10. Two of those events had to be canceled because of snowy weather conditions. But the drive went on.

This year was the third season for Wisti Nelson, who helped at the Walmart store on Cobb Parkway.

“It's super cool. It's amazing, the outpouring of support. It makes my day,” she said.

Nelson said she started volunteering to teach her children the meaning of the holiday and to share their good fortune. The youngsters ended up shopping for others.

“They had a blast. They got the message. The kids only get three things,” she said.

The next year, Nelson’s husband joined her.

She is always struck by the generosity of people. Some folks stop but don’t have time to buy, so instead write a check on the spot for \$100. Others shop and buy gifts for several children using their own money. Online donors also contribute to the drive.

“Any amount is appreciated,” said Nelson, who said she wouldn’t hesitate to participate for a fourth year.

This year Melanie Laidler helped Clark’s Christmas Kids for the first time.

“It was wonderful. There should be a lot of happy children on Christmas morning because of what was purchased,” she said before the holiday.

People were grateful to contribute, she said.

“Everyone was thanking us,” said Laidler. “But we were saying ‘thank you because you are the ones providing the gifts.’”