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MAKING A DIFFERENCE

What The Examiner has done this week to improve the community

Be An Angel helps those who are least able to help themselves — children with multiple disabilities or profound deafness. Some members of Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church help out too. Page 6A.



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Be An Angel volunteers help bring Christmas to disabled children

By **RUSTY GRAHAM**
rgraham@hcnonline.com

How do you wrap 12,000 Christmas presents in just two days?

With lots of help, says Marti Boone, executive director of Be An Angel.

"You don't have to give money, you can give time," Boone said. "Money can't wrap gifts."

Not that the organization doesn't like cash. After all, it does have to pay for all those presents.

Be An Angel seeks to improve the quality of life for children with multiple disabilities or profound deafness. One way of doing that is making sure those children have gifts to unwrap at Christmas.

Volunteers start shopping in

October, Boone said. Shopping lists are created by teachers or therapists who work with the children. Each child is personally "shopped" by a volunteer.

Volunteers also redistribute the gifts from the gift-wrapping center to the schools, where principals and teachers get them to students' homes.

Ninety percent of the children helped by Be An Angel are non-verbal and come from low-income families. They range in age from birth to 22-years-old.

This year the Be An Angel Christmas program is serving students from 256 campuses in 15 school districts on the Gulf Coast and in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. (Scheppes Dairy is using its trucks to carry north the gifts that are going that way.)

In an empty Michael's store on South Voss, clear plastic bags are lined from front to back, each holding toys and other gifts and tagged with a green label. Each bag represents a child, said Michael Musters, program director.

Activity is slow on a Friday afternoon, with a few volunteers wrapping gifts. A reporter is told that the scene will be quite different the next day.

Indeed it is. Shortly after noon on Saturday, the space is a vortex of activity, the bags of unwrapped toys becoming wrapped Christmas gifts by scores of volunteers.

One group of volunteers is the "Seekers" Sunday School class from Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church. It's a couples class, but the wrappers are all women.



Photo by RUSTY GRAHAM/The Examiner

Barbara Westmoreland (left), Virginia Smith, Jennifer Wilson and Cynthia Whittly of the "Seekers" Sunday School class at Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church wrap presents Saturday for Be An Angel.

The class performs a service project each Christmas, said Jennifer Wilson, who's sharing a table with Virginia Smith. This is the first year the class has worked with Be An Angel. In past years the class has adopted families through the church, and has helped with parties at the Spring Branch Family Development Center.

For class member Lisa Shelfer, helping Be An Angel has special significance — she teaches hearing-impaired students in several area districts, including Spring

Branch.

"This is near and dear to me," said Shelfer.

Robin Helbling is there with her mentee, Mara Casarrubias, from Northbrook High School. Casarrubias keeps track of names and tags while Helbling and Shelfer wrap presents.

Cynthia Whittly works alone — but steadily — at a table beside Smith and Wilson. Whittly is a long-time member of Memorial Drive Presbyterian, both her grown-sons earning Eagle Scout in the church's pack.

Using the floor as a table is Barbara Westmoreland, who keeps Virginia Smith's husband, Don, company.

The women are happy to talk but the wrapping and the work continues.

Now in its 22nd year, Be An Angel was started by a concerned parent at T.H. Rogers as a Christmas program. The program now helps severely handicapped and profoundly deaf children by providing specialized school equipment, personal equipment, activities such as camping trips and respite care for families.

Boone is quick to praise the Be An Angel board of directors and its most visible member, state Sen. Dan Patrick.

"He's the voice of our kids," said Boone. "He has a real heart for these children. They have no voice and he provides them one."

The Be An Angel Board is a hard-working one, Boone said, a point amplified by Musters.

"Many of our board members say they really have to work," said Musters. "Most of them were out here unloading trucks earlier."