

Brentwood Regional Chest still going strong 50 years after starting Christmas program

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For the Contra Costa Times

Posted: 12/20/2011 06:24:22 PM PST

Updated: 12/20/2011 09:13:28 PM PST

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Volunteer Adriana Ghiozzi, 14, of Brentwood, puts a frozen turkey into a car during the...



Alyssa Garibay and her mom, Dawn Garibay, sort through food on Dec. 16 as volunteers with the Brentwood Regional Community Chest holiday program now in its 50th year of giving to those in need.



Volunteer James Eaton, 6, of Brentwood, helps by carrying frozen turkeys to be given to the needy during the Brentwood Regional Community Chest event held at Brentwood Elementary School in Brentwood, Calif., on Saturday, Dec. 17, 2011. Over 500 needy families from Brentwood, Byron, Discovery Bay, Knightsen and Bethel Island were presented with a full holiday dinner, canned food and age-appropriate presents for their children. (Doug Duran/Staff)

Dawn Garibay was glad to be on the giving side of the table this year.

The Antioch mother of three and professed compulsive organizer recalled days when she had been on the receiving end of the seasonal giveaway as she stacked canned goods at Friday's Brentwood Regional Community Chest volunteer food sorting.

"And now I'm in the position to help others," she said, adding that she has volunteered at a soup kitchen, but this was her first box -packing adventure.

This year's philanthropic time is especially emotional for her. "I lost my mom this year. She'd be proud."

Garibay had plenty of company in her dedication to the cause. Approximately 200 volunteers showed up Dec. 16 and 17 to partake in the 50-year-old East Bay holiday tradition of providing food and toys for needy local families. The crowd resembled Hwy. 4 commute traffic as people of all ages sorted incoming donations into bins and stacks of fruits, vegetables, meats, sauces, pastas and other foodstuffs.

More than 550 local families received a box of food, a turkey and toys for the holidays via the Community Chest giveaway, said board member Lill Pierce. Her mother founded the event more than a half-decade ago.

Monetary and food donations were down this year, but there was still enough for every family who came to the door, Pierce said. Volunteers on Friday sorted the incoming goods in a record three hours.

"They did a good job this year, and they did it fast," she said.

Twenty-year Brentwood resident and six-year sort veteran Fred Ehler said consistency is the key to a quick sort. He marked his territory early, penning "Fred's" over the "Dry Soup" station label.

"You find your niche and you stay with it," the Rotarian joked. "You find your spot and you don't change."

As he stacked packs of ramen, the Rotarian marveled at the range of volunteers crowding the cafeteria at Brentwood Elementary School. Half a dozen Bristow Middle School students wore their school colors with pride. High school seniors collecting service hours toted boxes. Children as young as 5 with a can of peas or fruit cocktail in hand trailed after a parent

"Look at the young people in here! What they're doing is just wonderful," he said.

Steve and Keisha Zogg of Knightsen brought daughters Kendall, 9, and Jaclynn, 6, for a first taste of holiday volunteering. Keisha Zogg had called various charities over Thanksgiving only to find they didn't allow young volunteers. She heard of the Community Chest's kid-friendly attitude at a Realtors' meeting.

Jaclynn stayed close to mom during the crush of the early sort, and then worked a box with sister Kendall as volunteers slid boxes along rows of canned goods, filling them with food for Christmas dinner and a few extra meals.

Pierce said the group never turns away young volunteers. "We say, 'Bring your kids!' But they have to have an adult with them because the kids can't lift those boxes."

Families and local businesses are the driving force behind the Community Chest, she added. Board members organize the event, but it is local business owners from corn farmers who donate boxes to others who donate trucks that make it possible. The Friday evening and Saturday morning sorting and distribution would be impossible without the families who show up annually.

Pierce said the nonprofit group will continue to accept monetary donations at P.O. Box 845, Brentwood, CA 94513, throughout the year. Community Chest board members help far East County families in need of emergency food, shelter and medicine throughout they year, Pierce said.

TO HELP

Monetary donations can be sent to the Brentwood Community Regional Chest at P.O. Box 845, Brentwood, CA 94513, throughout the year.