

# Bringing joy, changing lives

My Joyful Heart provides basic-need items, holiday cheer

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Contributing Editor

When Diane Carroll sits down to read the wish lists of the children served by My Joyful Heart, she often bursts into tears.

“We have 8-year-old kids asking for toilet paper,” Carroll said. “We have an 11-year-old boy who has to ask for glasses and a haircut under ‘immediate needs,’ and a place to live.”

“I don’t understand how that happens in this time, when there’s an abundance of so much stuff, yet there’s so many kids who don’t have.”

The chance to help such children is why Carroll, a Lockport resident, founded the nonprofit organization My Joyful Heart, which will turn 14 years old this January. My Joyful Heart, which recently moved into a new location in Mokena, provides parcels of clothing, toys, hygienic products, food and other items to more than 800 area children in need.

Twenty-three local schools and three churches refer the children to Carroll and her volunteers, who pack more than 4,600 bags — six packages per individual, including a birthday gift parcel — throughout the year for the children. My Joyful Heart uses “wish list” forms filled out by the children to find personalized gifts featuring the children’s interests, favorite colors and more.

Carroll said many children served by My Joyful Heart have parents who have lost their jobs, or have low-paying jobs with short hours that don’t bring in enough money to support a family. Others live in extreme poverty, struggle in school or have



Diane Carroll (middle), founder and executive director of My Joyful Heart, talks to volunteer Karey Cronin (left) and her son Jack Cronin, 11, during a holiday packing session for My Joyful Heart. REBECCA SUSMARSKI/22ND CENTURY MEDIA

experienced trauma or abuse.

“We don’t really look at what the parent is doing or not doing; we know that whatever it is, it’s affecting the kids,” Carroll said. “There are schools that are 98, 99 percent all poverty-level kids, and we are more than willing to take on the responsibility to help.”

My Joyful Heart delivers the gift packages — which also contain personalized, encouraging messages from My Joyful Heart staff and volunteers — directly to the students at their schools starting at the beginning of each school year. Many schools report to Carroll that the children often come to the office and excitedly ask when their My Joyful Heart bag will arrive next.

Shannon Mongan, a social worker at Nathan Hale Primary and Intermediate Schools, saw the effect of My Joyful Heart’s approach for herself. She recalled one of her students who lived “in a lot of violence and neglect,” and who had about 27 office referrals for physical aggression — as a kindergartener.

After My Joyful Heart accepted the boy and his siblings into its program, his

life and demeanor began to change. When the boy became a first-grader and stole ranch dressing packets from the school cafeteria because he didn’t have enough food at home, Carroll set up a grocery bill for the family through sponsors and had monthly groceries delivered to his home, Mongan said.

Now a fourth-grader, the boy hasn’t had an office referral in more than two years, Mongan said.

“He’d gone from making the statement, ‘I don’t know why people care about me, I’m going to jail’ in kindergarten, to saying, ‘I’m going to be a teacher’ in third-grade,” she said. “And he’s not just the only one. We’ve got so many students that need so much help.”

Making that type of connection with the children is one of the things Carroll loves most about the job — possibly because she understands the struggles many of My Joyful Heart’s children go through. She raised three children as a single mother, and at one point she worked three jobs at the same time to support them.

In the early 2000s, she

started writing letters from Santa Claus to children in need at Christmastime. Her decision to follow-up with two of those children and send them other holiday gifts throughout the year formed the inspiration for My Joyful Heart.

“When they sent me [an 8-year-old boy’s] Christmas wish list that year, for December of 2002, he had asked for a game, clothes, tissues, hand wipes and a hug,” she said. “That was it.”

She left her job as vice president of an extended warranty company only four years later to start My Joyful Heart full-time. Now, as a new year approaches and with her nonprofit in a new office, Carroll hopes to continue reaching out to more schools and community organizations this year — and hopefully serve even more children.

“I can’t imagine myself doing anything else with my life but what I’m doing,” Carroll said. “I’m blessed because I see the Lord’s work first hand [here], and it’s another blessing to know that these kids’ lives are being made a little bit easier because of it.”



Will Luoma (right), of Mokena, talks to Santa Claus, who resembles Ronald Cutshall Dec. 19 at the Mokena Community Public Library. JEAN LACHAT/22ND CENTURY MEDIA

## Season’s greetings

Mr. and Mrs. Claus pay visit to Mokena Community Library

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Five-year-old Marco Zavala sat on Santa Claus’ lap with a shy smile across his face as Saint Nicholas reminded him to put out chocolate chip cookies and milk on Christmas Eve.

Mrs. Claus assured Zavala he is on the good list, as he then told Mr. and Mrs. Claus his Christmas wishes.

“He can’t wait for Christmas,” said his mother, Pearl.

The spirit of the holidays was bright for all of the children gathered on Dec. 18 when Santa and Mrs. Claus visited the Mokena Community Public Library.

Keeping with tradition, the library hosted Santa and Mrs. Claus for local community members and their children to visit and take photos. As has been done in the past several years, Santa’s reindeer also came along for the holiday visit.

According to library staff, Santa and Mrs. Claus have made an appearance each year for as long as any one can remember.

“I’ve been here 17 years, [and] even before I came we’ve always done Santa,” said Pat Hoornaert, director of youth services at the Mokena Community Public Library. “Some families come here every year, and you see a lot of familiar faces.”

Hoornaert said she has enjoyed seeing some of the children growing up as they have gathered each year for the festivities.

“One mom came to me to me and said, ‘She didn’t cry this year,’ referring to her young daughter,” Hoornaert said. “Seeing them grow is a good feeling.”

Wendy Asbridge, director of young adults at the library, said that the library continues to bring the tradition back each year to give back to the community and promote the holidays. Seeing the children’s excitement brought a smile to her face as she looked on as one child after another sat on Santa’s lap.

“They leave little letters, which is just so cute,” she said. “You’ve got the screamers, and the ones that’ll just pop up on his lap ... it’s just a nice thing to give back to the community.”

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