

News COVER STORY

My Joyful Heart expands its 'store' to aid children

DANNY CIAMPRONE, Editor

Just past a small office area and through a double set of doors tower shelves, boxes and pallets of items ranging from school clothing and shoes, to hygiene products and toys.

It has become affectionately known as the "store" for My Joyful Heart, a nonprofit, faith-based organization that provides personalized assistance and encouragement for children in need throughout Chicagoland, and one that recently expanded its operations by moving into a larger warehouse in Mokena.

"Anything that a child needs and is missing in their life, we try to provide," said Executive Director Diane Carroll June 23, as she gave a tour of the new facility.

With the help of \$35 a month donations from sponsors, My Joyful Heart is able to provide five gift bags throughout the year for a child in need, plus a birthday gift and a card for encouragement. But since Carroll started the nonprofit in 2002, it has not just been material items requested from children, but more often than not, it is something she cannot simply select from a shelf.

"We've had kids that have written that they want to be happy," Carroll said. "One little girl wrote for a new heart for her mom. They ask for a job for their dad ... a home."

While Carroll may not be able to put certain items in a gift bag, she can give words of encouragement, and at least let a child know that someone is thinking about



My Joyful Heart, having just moved to a larger location in Mokena, provides various items for children in need year-round, including school supplies, clothing, hygiene products and gifts. JEAN LACHAT/22ND CENTURY MEDIA

MY JOYFUL HEART

- **What:** The nonprofit My Joyful Heart provides various items for children in need in Chicagoland, from hygiene products to clothing.
- **Where:** 9981 W. 190th St., Suite L, in Mokena
- **More information:** Visit www.myjoyfulheart.org.
- **Special event:** An official open house will take place at the new location from 9:30 a.m.-1 p.m. July 11 with refreshments, tours and a "walk down memory lane."

them throughout the year.

"There's plenty of organizations that give away winter coats, and now there's a lot more doing back to school supplies, but we do it throughout the year, so it's a constant encouragement for these kids," she said.

Of course that work has come with a price, from the long hours to operating with mainly a staff of 35 volunteers that, last year, totaled 2,237 hours of work. But now, thanks to the new location in Mokena, My Joyful Heart has been able to double its size and expand its space for more donation items, easier access and less worry about how to take in inventory.

"It's really new and exciting for us because we've never had any of this before," Carroll said of the new location.

Warehouse operating manager Jeffrey Schwartz was busy getting the new space ready, which he said has been "a lot of work," but nothing he minds doing.

"It's probably some of the most rewarding time I've put into any project because I always bear in mind who the ultimate beneficiaries are of our efforts, and that's the kids, so that makes it all worthwhile," Schwartz said.

State Rep. Margo McDermed was one of the first

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Mr. Benny's to close Matteson restaurant, focus on Mokena

DANNY CIAMPRONE, Editor

After more than three decades of operating Mr. Benny's Steak and Lobster House at its Matteson location, the Leonardo family has decided to close its doors and focus solely on the Mokena restaurant.

"It's time for me to hang up my spurs," said Benny Leonardo, co-owner of both full service restaurants in the southwest suburbs.

Leonardo has been in the restaurant business for almost 50 years total, having operated the Matteson location for 38 years before opening the restaurant in Mokena, located at 19200 Everett Lane.

Leonardo said the Matteson location has seen its time after so many years,

and as he gets older, he decided now was the right time to move on. But even with the doors closing on the restaurant's first location, Leonardo said he can still take with him the phenomenal memories he has made there, including all of the outstanding friendships he has made over the years.

"Of course it's bittersweet; I've been there 30-something years," he said. "It has phenomenal memories. My mother and father were living when I was there ... things have changed. It's very bittersweet. It really is."

The Matteson location is scheduled to close Aug. 1, and Leonardo said all of the staff members working there will have a place at the Mokena restaurant if they choose to work there. The

Leonardo family is also exploring new concepts for the Matteson property.

Leonardo has been in the restaurant business since 1959 when he opened the former Dominick's Club in Chicago Heights before his entire family started working at Mr. Benny's Steak and Lobster House in 1977.

In a previous interview with *The Messenger*, Leonardo said while the restaurant has evolved over the years, his philosophy has stayed the same – treating the customer right with an unforgettable dining experience.

"When you walk into the restaurant, we make you feel like you're the only customer that matters," Leonardo told *The Messenger*. "We want you to feel special."

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to tour the new facility on June 19 with Carroll.

"One woman's vision has done so much for so many children in our area," McDermed said in an email Thursday, June 25, to *The Messenger*. "I can't wait to see how much bigger this vision will get now that My Joyful Heart has a large, permanent home to make the work easier and where more people can participate."

The new area may have doubled in size compared to the nonprofit's old space, but for Carroll, that has not changed her humble beginnings.

In late 2001, Carroll started answering Christmas letters from two children who attended Dvorak Technology Academy Elementary School in Chicago. In 2002, Carroll

started looking into what happened after Christmas to the children that received gifts, and the teacher said nothing in terms of receiving more items. Carroll then got the idea to do something for other holidays, such as Easter and Valentine's Day, so she started sending gifts again to children.

Carroll said from that initial January 2002 call inquiring about two children has now grown into 760 children that My Joyful Heart serves today.

Over the years, Carroll said she has heard from several children who succeeded in using the program, including a boy named Richard.

Carroll said Richard was deemed a "problem" child, who lived with his mom and three siblings in a shelter, and would act out. But he was put in the program until he graduated from high school, where

upon graduating, he was captain of the basketball team and achieved the honor for most improved student.

"I wrote to him, I would send him things that I thought he would need throughout the year and when he graduated high school, he went back to the grammar school, told them he wanted to talk to me, and he told me, 'I just wanted to tell you I kept the joy in my heart. ... I never forgot what you did for me,'" Carroll said.

Now that My Joyful Heart has a new location, Carroll said she is unsure of what will come next for the nonprofit, but she knows who will remain the focal point.

"My goal is really to provide for as many kids as we possibly can and get them to understand that it's not just the bag we're giving them; it's the love that's packed into it," she said. "It's the fact they are loved."