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JOY TO THE KIDS

Mokena-based nonprofit My Joyful Heart provides gifts to needy children throughout the year,
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Diane Carroll, founder and executive director of My Joyful Heart, sorts fleece blankets that eventually will be distributed to needy children. AMANDA JACOBS/22ND CENTURY MEDIA

News COVER STORY


My Joyful Heart volunteers Barbara Haase (left) and Jean Toberman prepare gift bags for children at the organization's headquarters, located inside the M. Cooper Supply warehouse in Mokena.

AMANDA
JACOBS/22ND
CENTURY MEDIA

Continual care

■Charity provides gifts for needy children year-round

Amanda Jacobs
Editor

For several years, Diane Carroll provided gifts for two underprivileged children during the holidays. In January 2002, she realized that she wanted to do something more.

"Everybody remembers needy kids at Christmas," she said. "I started thinking about what happens to these kids after Christmas."

Carroll began providing the children with gifts for other holidays and their birthdays, and family and friends soon joined her to help other children. Her efforts eventually evolved into the nonprofit organization My Joyful Heart, which was formally incorporated in 2004. In 2006, Carroll left her full-time corporate job to dedicate herself to My Joyful Heart, which today helps more than 475 children in the south suburban region.

"It just has kept growing," said Carroll, a Lockport resident.

The nonprofit currently operates out of a corner of the M. Cooper Supply ware-

house on Spring Lake Drive in Mokena, a space that Chief Executive Officer Dennis Goode has allowed the organization to occupy for free since January 2009, Carroll said.

My Joyful Heart works with 16 schools and two churches to connect with children in need, Carroll said, and it hasn't been hard to find them.

"Wherever we find the need, that's where we go," she said, adding, "The need is huge everywhere, but we also have a need in our own community."

Once children are connected with My Joyful Heart, they remain with the organization until their situation improves or they move out of the area, Carroll said, and they receive gifts for Christmas, Valentine's Day, Easter, summer, going back to school and their birthdays.

"It's a continual encouragement for the kids," she said. "They know that someone out there cares for them."

My Joyful Heart provides children with support that helps them succeed while also fulfilling some of their most basic needs, Carroll said. Some children whom the organization assists live in situations in which money

is so tight that items some might take for granted are sacrificed to pay for food or rent, she said.

"It's pretty sad when a child 8 or 9 years old needs to put on their wish list a pair of shoes," she said.

My Joyful Heart gift bags include hygiene items, clothing, shoes, blankets and school supplies, as well as toys and games.

"When we give a child a gift, it's not one item," Carroll said. "It's a variety of things that child might need."

To provide the gifts, Carroll works with a staff of one other full-time employee and about 25 regular volunteers, she said. Although it can be a challenge to acquire the funding necessary to keep the gift bags going, she said, the effort is worth it.

"[The children] need to know that there's somebody out there that cares enough to provide for what they need," she said. "It's such a fulfilling calling."

For more information or to sponsor a child, visit www.myjoyfulheart.org.

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