

Project HELP Remembers Teens During the Holiday Season

By Julie Solomon

Start the Holidays off right as a Shining Star for someone in need!

As the holidays approach, we are reminded that this is the season of giving. We hear of countless toy drives through churches, schools, and businesses all trying to collect as many gifts as possible for young children whose parents cannot afford to get them a present for the holidays. Programs such as Blue and Brown Santa provide gifts for young children but what about the countless teenagers who will receive nothing under their Christmas trees? Project HELP sponsors a program called Teen Christmas, which focuses on helping out homeless teenagers during the holidays. This year, Teen Christmas has 35 teens participating. This is quite impressive for the program's third year, surpassing the 22 from the first year and the 28 they helped last year. For this particular program, they target teens that are in doubled-up living situations (i.e., living with another family) or living in a motel or hotel. Jerretta Jimmerson, a member of the Project HELP staff, says that the reason they do not collect gifts for teens that are living in shelters is that shelters usually have some sort of program to provide holiday gifts for the teens staying with them.



Project HELP is a sector of the Austin Independent School District which helps homeless youth enroll in school. Furthermore, they help students apply for free lunches and bus passes to get to school. Also, they work throughout the year to collect school supplies, clothing, and other necessities for their clients. However, this time of year they concentrate their efforts toward their third annual Teen Christmas. To participate in this program, a teen (middle school or high school age) must fill out a Christmas Referral form, which allows the teens to request three things. Often participants will request large items such as a bike, DVD player,

Discman, etc. Clothing requests are usually fulfilled via a gift card, allowing sponsors to avoid the dilemma of choosing clothes for a teenager.

Once the form has been completed, Project HELP's staff faxes requests to their sponsors, who donate the items. Although this is only their third year running this program, they have many faithful repeat donors. Many of these donors are faculty and employees within the Austin Independent School District, such as Sandra Saucedo, Angela Rockstead, and Anna Almaraz. Other groups include a brownie troop from Eanes Elementary (which sponsored twelve girls this year), Tarrytown Baptist Church, and Life Touch photography who took Christmas pictures for 90 families.

Donors are asked to deliver the gifts, wrapped and bearing a Christmas tag with the recipient's name on it, to the Project HELP office by December 10th. The gifts are distributed during the last week of school to the teen parents, who in turn are asked to put the parcels under their trees. Upon receiving (but not opening) their gifts, the teens write thank you cards to the donors. After Christmas, once they have actually opened the gifts, they usually write another thank you note to their sponsor. The gifts are not always anonymous; sponsors can deliver the gifts themselves. In fact, Jimmerson recalls one donor who actually dressed up as Santa Claus to deliver gifts. Jimmerson's face lights up at the mention of the program's donors. She becomes more and more impressed with the donors generosity each year, some of who go beyond what the program asks for and get gifts for entire families. Some donors even donate Thanksgiving or Christmas dinners to Project HELP clients. To thank their supporters, Project HELP held their Annual Cookie Caper on December 10, 2004. This little get-together allowed the people who assist Project HELP not only during the holiday season, but also year round, to feel appreciated and remembered for all they do. Jimmerson stresses that although they deeply appreciate all the help they receive during the holiday season, they hope that people continue to remember them year round especially with donations such as clothes, household items, school supplies, and even food.

For more information on Project HELP, refer to their article in the Spotlight Archives.