

## **Holiday Programs**

Many families living in the Wilson School District face a tremendous amount of challenges on a daily basis. 25% of the children that attend Wilson Schools are classified as homeless while the other 75% live in dilapidated housing or local hotels. 98% of our total population qualifies for the free/reduced-cost Federal lunch program. These families typically do not enjoy many hot meals, much less the luxury of good food and a joyous holiday season. One of our objectives is to continuously augment our overall efforts to assist families in this community. Our holiday programs are important events to attempt to provide needy families the opportunity to enjoy good food and a better holiday season than they would not have otherwise enjoyed.

In order for us to achieve this goal, we have implemented the following holiday programs and solicit pledges, contributions, donations and the gift of time from our administrators, teachers and business partners. The Community Center works closely with school counselors, psychologist, nurse and teachers to identify those families who are most in need. Many of the identified families are families who normally do not seek assistance during the school year. The Community Center strives to prevent duplication of services to same families. As a result, we are able to provide holiday joy to more families within our school district.

### **Adoption of Families:**

Some of our teachers and business partners request to adopt families for Thanksgiving and/or Christmas holidays. After identifying families, the Community Center normally conducts a home visit and obtains a "wish list" from each of the family members. The Center acts as the conduit between the two parties to ensure a successful and rewarding event.

There are business partners who request to adopt the grandparents (Nana (grandmother) and Tata (grandfather)) of our students and/or seniors living within the Wilson community. The Community Center works closely with members of its Governing Board, community residents and volunteers to identify these seniors. Once these seniors are identified, a home visit is conducted and a "wish list" is obtained from the senior. Sadly, most "wish list" items are everyday necessities such as toiletries, slippers, etc.

An after-event survey of the families, seniors and business partners is conducted. The responses are emotionally overwhelming and rewarding to all parties involved in this process. There are many business partners that return each year solely for these events. Wilson School District is very appreciative and is deeply honored to have such wonderful people!

### **Thanksgiving and Christmas Dinners:**

Efforts are made to provide our neediest families with a holiday meal. We solicit donations of frozen turkeys and all the trimmings. For those families living in dilapidated housing or local hotels that do not have a kitchen or whose stoves/ovens do not work, we seek grocery store meal certificates.

### **Salvation Army:**

The Wilson School District collaborates with its neighbor, the Salvation Army, to provide more of our students and their families with an opportunity for a joyful Christmas.

The first program is the Christmas Angel Program. Each year, the Salvation Army provides school districts with applications for this program. The number of applications received is dependent on our demographics and enrollment. Students and their families are identified with the help of school personnel (counselor, psychologist, nurse, and teachers). Each child in the family, under the age of 12, submits their Christmas toy wish. This toy wish is then attached to Christmas trees in participating malls throughout the Valley. Aside from the two toys each child (under the age of 12) receives, the family also receives a food box and/or a food store certificate.

The second program is the Salvation Army Adopt-A-Family Program. This program is for families that are in “crisis,” i.e., household income has been diminished due to hospitalization/surgery of mother or father, death of either parent, house fire, serious or terminal illness, etc. Again, families are identified with the help of school personnel.

### **Adopt-A-Classroom:**

Approximately 15 years ago, Wilson implemented its “adopt-a-classroom” program. At the time, an administrator was approached by a student whose only wish was to have at least one present under her Christmas tree. It occurred to him and other administrators that this situation was not unique to this student – that there were many other students in the Wilson School District whose parents could not afford to purchase Christmas gifts for their children. School administrators and the Governing Board took immediate action and instituted the Adopt-A-Classroom program. No longer was a Wilson School student going to go through Christmas without a present under their Christmas tree!

The process is simple but requires a lot of coordination and communication. We begin working on this program in September by contacting partners. Here’s how it works:

- Companies, agencies, individuals and/or organizations (aka sponsors) are sought to adopt a classroom (normally 27 students per classroom) from our Head Start and Primary (kinder through 3rd grades) Schools.
- As a writing assignment, students are asked to write a “wish” letter to Santa. Teachers help the students compose the letter and are instructed to inform the students that because Santa has many children on his list, that their wish should be for one gift (costing no more than \$20/\$25). For those students who cannot yet read or write, they cut out their wish gift from toy store advertisements.
- All Santa wish letters from each classroom are then delivered to the Community Center. The Community Center and its volunteers read each letter (normally about 750 letters) to make sure they are legible and that the toy is cost-appropriate.
- A classroom is then assigned a sponsor and, the Santa wish letters are delivered to the sponsor prior to the Thanksgiving holiday.

- Sponsors share the student Santa wish letters among its co-workers/employees and they each go shopping for the toy in their letter.
- The Community Center works closely with the sponsors, classrooms and administrators in coordinating and/or troubleshooting any questions, comments or problems. It is the conduit between all parties.
- All sponsors come to the classrooms on the same day to deliver their wrapped presents. Times are coordinated with the teacher. Students are told that these sponsors are Santa's helpers. Santa's helpers (the sponsors) bring "goodies" and have a party with the students. The students, teachers and Santa's helpers enjoy time together singing songs, reading a Christmas story, opening their toys and eating fun food!
- On this day, students from each classroom are also scheduled to visit Santa at his Santa's Village. These times are coordinated around the time sponsors are coming to the classroom. Some sponsors opt to bring a Santa and/or Elf to their assigned classroom. If so, these classrooms are not scheduled to visit Santa at Santa's Village. Scheduling of visiting Santa at Santa's village is crucial as we do not want children to see more than one Santa at a time (they still believe!). IF this does occur, we simply tell the children that Santa's brother, St. Nick, is helping Santa – phew!!
- After the event, all students are given another writing assignment. They write thank you letters to their sponsor. The Community Center and its volunteers then deliver the letters to all sponsors.

It is important that we prepare all sponsors for some heart-wrenching issues, such as students requesting clothing instead of a toy, requesting a toy for their sibling, or not opening their gift during their classroom's Christmas party in order to save it for Christmas day (it may be their only gift under their Christmas tree at home). Sadly, these, and others, are real issues that occur each year.

Sponsors look forward to this event year after year. They have so much fun that they begin calling the Community Center as early as July! And, many of them adopt more than one classroom. Some of these partners include:

- Accenture
- Adolphson/Bates Family & Friends
- Allstate Insurance
- Arizona Court of Appeals
- Arizona Dept of Gaming
- Arizona Dept of Housing & Urban Dev.
- Arizona Federal Credit Union
- Barrow Neurological Associates
- Body by Design
- Caracalla, Julio & Rhonda
- CBIZ Actuarial & Benefits Consultants, Inc.
- City of Phoenix Aviation/Corlette, Skaer & DeVotto Architects

- City of Phoenix Police (Foreign Prosecution, Homicide, Robbery & Crime Lab)
- City of Phoenix Public Information Office
- Ferguson/Ort Family
- First Student (fka Laidlaw Education Services)
- Hobbs Family & Friends
- Jones Family & Friends
- Lewis & Roca
- Mayor Phil Gordon & Staff
- Network Infrastructure Corporation
- North Phoenix Baptist Church #242
- Office Depot
- ON Semi-Conductor
- Sagicor Life Insurance Company
- Scottsdale Chorus of Sweet Adelines, International
- Southwest Airlines
- St. Joseph's Hospital - Neuro ICU
- Ulrich Family
- Valley Metro Rail
- Wheeler Construction
- Wilson-Skiff Alumni Association

Don't have time to shop or visit the classroom? There are certain business partners that adopt a classroom but cannot physically come to Wilson on the day of the parties. These sponsors are assigned a classroom whose teacher does not mind doing all the shopping. The sponsor simply writes a check and the teacher does all shopping for the presents and goodies for the party. Hispanic students from ASU and others volunteer to help the teacher in the classroom the day of the party.

**Others ways you can help:**

- From time-to-time, we have students who enroll the day before or the day of the Christmas party. This does not give Santa's helpers enough time to shop for the student. We seek donations of boy and girl toys to have on hand in the event this occurs.
- Donations of wrapping paper, tape, gift tags and bags, assorted batteries, disposable cameras, paper plates, cups, napkins, refreshments and/or fun foods are appreciated.
- Students at Wilson Elementary (4th through 8th grades), our "wiser and more sophisticated students" who no longer "believe", are appreciative of either a dance with a DJ, tickets to the movies, or a classroom party with pizza, fun foods and refreshments. We also seek funding to be able to provide them with classroom parties, entertainment and transportation.
- Monetary donations of any kind: Your monetary donations are tax deductible.
- Volunteer your time to help organize these events, reading student Santa wish letters, delivering letters, helping teachers in the classroom, setting up Santa's Village, be a Santa, taking class

photos @ Santa's Village, and much, much more. Your time is priceless and very much appreciated!

For some families, the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays can be sad and bleak. At Wilson, however, every effort is made to provide our neediest families with food, a gift for the children and family joy. We cannot do it alone – YOU can and do make a difference at Wilson!