



Connections - December 14, 2022



CCKids staff, volunteers and caregivers hit the streets of Stuart and Port St. Lucie earlier this month in each community's annual holiday parade. Our theme was "Storybook Christmas - the Only Thing Missing from Our Story is You!"

Let Me Tell You a Christmas Story

By Christina Kaiser - I don't often come out from behind the Christmas packages to give first-person accounts, but I really felt compelled to do that today.

I have been coordinating the Christmas gift collection for our local foster-care community for more than 20 years, and in that time, I have seen my share of end-of-the-year kindness, generosity and comradery.

I've learned over the years to not panic



when mistakes happen. With this project, things work out the way you wish everything did. Everyone takes personal accountability with the project. Every single person moves with purpose as if he or she truly believes an individual can make the difference - even if it's as simple as getting a gift to a child whose name was left off a sponsor list.

This year, I - yes, totally my error - left off AN ENTIRE CASELOAD of wish requests! We're talking 35 children! With my stomach sloshing around at my feet, I

picked up the phone and called or texted every single person I thought might be able to help.

I called Kristin West, at the Hands and Feet Foundation. I called the Foster Closet. I called the Forever Family project down in Fort Lauderdale. I called the St. Lucie County Toys for Tots program. And, of course, I let our Christmas partner, Guardians for New Futures, know what happened.

Within 20 minutes, we had our gifts! Every group was willing to help in some way - whether it was filling requests immediately with reserve toys or offering to donate whatever toys they had remaining after serving their own folks.

Gia Tutalo-Mote, the founder of Forever Family and south Florida news broadcaster, even offered to drive up from Miami to help out.

I won't lie. Sometimes, my husband and I think about leaving this area to be closer to our adult children. But it's moments like this when I feel so intimately connected to the world around me that leaving becomes unthinkable.

I don't know if it's the community or the time of year; whatever it is, it fills me up and reminds me of how fortunate I am to be a part of something so wonderful.

Merry Christmas and happy holidays, everyone!

Behind the Mission: Foster Youth Back to Help with Christmas Drive

You might remember Tonia Fede, the former foster youth who used her federal transition funds to purchase school supplies for children in foster care.



Tonia, like most youth in care, received federal funding to help her make a successful transition into independence while also navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. She budgeted carefully, used what she need and used the rest to purchase school supplies for children still in foster care.

She's back!

Tonia contacted CCKids in October and asked for a few names so she could fulfill the Christmas wish requests of children in care. Then she reached out again and asked for more. And then still more.

Why does she do it? Tonia says she wants to give back to the community that helped her so much when she was in care and to be a positive force in a system that - despite best attempts and dedicated individuals - doesn't always get it right.

"I have been in and out of care growing up throughout my life," she said. "I have always had a passion for helping others, standing up for what's right and most importantly those in need."

The Month in Pictures (and Lights)



From left to right, above, are Jordan Bebout and Josie Kirchner at the Stuart Christmas Parade, and, Santa's helpers - AKA Guardians for New Futures - at holiday headquarters, where gifts come in and are organized and fulfilled for each child.



Santa pays a visit to children attending the St. Lucie County foster care Christmas party. He later reported that all the children were good this year :)



Jerra Wisecup dons a gift costume at the Port St. Lucie Christmas Parade. As if she's not a present already!



As always, the community came through for this year's gift drive. Here is a picture of the Florida Highway Patrol, which provided gifts to 15 children in foster care.

Communities Connected for Kids is a community-based lead agency contracted by the Florida Department of Children and Families.
