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THE SPIRIT OF GIVING

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The Weekly looks at how Beverly Hills has raised money-- and spirits-- for those less fortunate this holiday season.

Michelle Zenarosa

You won't find coal in Beverly Hills stockings this year. With

Christmas on Sunday and Hanukkah beginning its eight-day celebration this upcoming Monday, the holiday season is upon us bringing an ever greater appreciation for family, friends and loved ones to eat, drink and be merry. But for Beverly Hills students, local congregants and parishioners, this appreciation goes beyond family. It extends to complete strangers and those less fortunate. This holiday season Beverly Hills' places of worship along with students, parents and teachers, have raised thousands of dollars in clothing, food and toys, making this holiday season a little brighter for those in need.

BHUSD, in conjunction with the service learning theme of "Caring", is giving to the less fortunate in a big way this year, showing that they really care during the holiday season. All the schools in the district have made huge strides in providing aid to those in need throughout the year with a variety of projects that included not only donating, but hard work as well.

"The theme this year fits right into the service learning program and all of this is really important work for students to understand and to be able to show their caring during the holidays," said Diane Mead, project coordinator for service learning at Beverly High.

The high school carried out several projects this year including the traditional Madrigals visit to the Albion Street Elementary School in Los Angeles, where choir members gave presents and sang to the Albion Street students last Friday. The holiday gesture has been a Beverly High

Madrigal tradition for more than 75 years.

Twenty student representatives from Beverly High also attended the Chamber of Commerce's South Beverly Block Party last Saturday as "Santa's Helpers." Students passed out balloons and water to the guests and directed parking. All proceeds from the event went to benefit the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

Individual classes at the high school also lent out their hand this year. Students from Raquel Ramsey's English Learning class collected presents for the orphans at Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services in Los Angeles. Krishna Deaver's ninth and tenth grade English classes are committing five hours of their time reading books to the elderly or children who can't read over their winter break.

But the high school isn't the only school helping out this season. Students from all four of the elementary schools also put in their efforts for district-wide food and toy drives as well as individually.

"We have different competitions between the grades and it helps the kids really get excited about bringing in more while they're understanding what they're doing and why," said Nadine Neiman, Beverly Vista PTA president. "We have an incredibly successful food drive -- more successful than ever and the competition between the classes was really helpful."

Beverly Vista students made placemats and collected Christmas cards for homeless shelters. El Rodeo assembled toiletry kits for PATH (People Assisting The Homeless) and also conducted a "Joy Drive" in which students donated toys for the Westside Children's Center.

For eight years, Horace Mann has organized a Christmas Eve Feed The Hungry event with the West Hollywood Food Coalition in which students and their families make brown paper bag dinners and make Christmas cards for the homeless. The lunches include peanut butter jelly sandwiches, fruit, candy canes and bread.

"Kids have always really enjoyed it; they feel like they're helping their community," said Colleen Sternshein, community service vice president for Horace Mann PTA. "They really enjoy making the cards. Everybody comes together at our school so it's a very satisfying experience knowing they can help without donating money. There are so many events about donating money and it's hard for kids because they don't have money. This way they can actually donate their time and make a difference."

Last year, the event produced more than 2,000 brown bag dinners for the homeless.

With Christmas marking the 119th day since Hurricane Katrina struck, Beverly Hills students have been working diligently the past couple months to help their fellow students in the South.

Beverly Vista students have collected over 2,000 books to restock the library for a Pass Christian school in Mississippi that was devastated by the hurricane. Beverly Vista chose to adopt the school because it was awarded as a Blue Ribbon school, like BV.

“By taking a school district very much like our own school district that was destroyed and has nothing. For kids to go home and look through their collection of books and say, ‘I think kids my age would enjoy reading this book and I’ve already read it so I’m going to donate this book,’ -- just for them to come up with things like that on their own is more meaningful,” Neiman said. “It’s about kids doing for kids.”

The school has had trouble in the past storing the books at Beverly Vista as Pass Christian has not had a place to put the books as everything has been destroyed. Beverly Vista is planning on transporting the books sometime after the New Year.

“We collected more books than we could ever imagine in our wildest dreams. We don’t have anywhere else to store them. We’re very lucky that we have been able to find a place to keep them,” Neiman said. “You never know what you’re going to get-- you figure a few hundred. You end up with a few thousand. The response is tremendous. You put boxes out there and they are overflowing beyond words.”

Another problem Beverly Vista is currently facing is the transportation of the books. The school has attempted to work with UPS, however, the attempts have not been very receptive so they are looking for a member in the community to underwrite or sponsor the transportation of the books to Pass Christian.

El Rodeo has also been continuing their relief efforts for Hurricane Katrina victims through fund-raising, bake sales and donation of school supplies. Third graders at the school have collected money earmarked for hurricane victims through a service learning project for UNICEF. Junior high students at Horace Mann collected more than \$1,500 for the pets left homeless after Hurricane Katrina and fifth graders collected more than \$1,100 for hurricane victims.

“The thing about community service is that it’s really easy for parents to

go out and buy things and donate them, but the thing about doing them at the school is to make it something so that the kids can understand and participate in,” Neiman said. “I can drop cans of food off for my kids and say, ‘Yeah, our family participated,’ but unless the kids understand what they’re doing and why they’re doing it, it’s pointless. As adults, we give to many charities anyway. The point is to be involved.”

Synagogues and churches have always set the standard for giving throughout the year, not just during Christmas and Hanukkah. With the recent world tragedies, many would believe that giving would not be as potent this holiday season. However, congregants have proven that myth wrong.

“This year the giving was the greatest I’ve seen in my many years here,” said Colm O’Ryan, pastor at Good Shepherd Catholic Church of Beverly Hills. “I wouldn’t have expected this year because of what they call the ‘dawn of fatigue’-- people have been called on to give so much due to tsunamis and hurricanes. It was a tremendous outpouring of generosity.”

Parishioners at Good Shepherd donated almost 300 gifts to a poorer parish, St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church in the Pico-Union area of Los Angeles. The gifts were generated from the annual “Jesse Tree” project in which parishioners pick a tree ornament that describes the name, age and gift description of a member of the St. Thomas church and bring back a gift of that same description.

“The response was overwhelming. All the ornaments were gone from the tree,” O’Ryan said. “The hall looked like a Tibetan store-- there were so many articles in there. It’s one of those things where the giver is more enriched than the recipient.”

Good Shepherd also runs an on-going service in which the church donates blankets and food service to the homeless twice a week.

Beverly Hills Presbyterian Church also runs a year-round program that feeds the homeless, providing food as well as clothing. For Christmas, the church planned a extra special festive lunch for those who come, decorating the room and making the holiday as celebratory as possible.

But Beverly Hills churches aren’t the only ones helping—local synagogues are also expressing generosity for the Hanukkah season.

Chabad of Northern Beverly Hills on North Foothill Road will be having a children’s carnival Sunday, Dec. 25 to help kids keep Hanukkah spirit as well as fundraises an average of \$10,000 per year to distribute money packages to poorer families throughout Los Angeles.

“[Our congregants are] very generous. We have to help one another. If we don’t help one another, who will?” Rabbi Yosef Shusterman of Chabad of Northern Beverly Hills said.

Temple Emanuel on Burton Way also has several projects planned to help those in need during the Hanukkah celebrations. The religious school is continuing a year-long program that provides food for the hungry and has developed a partnership with the Westside Food Bank, and has particularly asked its members to donate baby food.

At their Mitzvah Day of volunteering in November, Temple Emanuel donated approximately 500 pounds of food for Thanksgiving and plans to do as well for Christmas and Hanukkah.

“I don’t necessarily look at it in sense of just Hanukkah-- I look at it in a sense of everyone,” said Geoff Prass, religious school principal at Temple Emanuel. “With the holidays and the stress of the holidays on [a needy] family, it can take a little bit of the stress off to have something. When you break it down for some of these food banks, a couple dollars can actually feed an entire family of four for an entire day.”

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