

TEMECULA: Making Christmas bright

Despite personal troubles, local man brings holiday joy to thousands

By JOHN HUNNEMAN - Staff Writer | Wednesday, December 24, 2008 5:59 PM PST ∞

TEMECULA ---- Sometime this morning after his visiting grandchildren have opened their presents, Denny Mighell will look out the window from the home he rents to the house across the street he lost over the summer.

Across the region, thousands of children who might not have had much of a Christmas morning have smiles on their faces, thanks to Mighell and the nonprofit group he founded 17 years ago.

The hardships of the last year have hit many in Southwest County. The Mighell family has felt the sting of the sour economy, compounded by medical bills and other financial woes, that forced them to leave their longtime Temecula home.

Still, the effort the couple began years ago to make sure local kids have a Christmas has continued.

"This is the toughest year we've ever had," Mighell said. "So many people are looking to us for help. We weren't going to shut it down just because of our personal problems."

An effort begins

The story is familiar to many.

In 1992, Denny, his wife, Maryann, and several friends came to the aid of a group of children at a shelter at Christmastime.

"The person there who normally handled Christmas for those kids had left earlier in the year," Denny said. "When it came time for Christmas, no one else had picked up the ball."

Enough gifts and donations were raised in short order to make Christmas bright for those children, and the seeds for what would become the nonprofit group Temecula Valley People Helping People were sown.

As Southwest County's population ballooned over the years, so did the need filled by Mighell's group.

In 1992, People Helping People provided Christmas gifts for several dozen children.

By 2004, that number had grown to about 4,000. This year, some 6,000 children and senior citizens ---- from Lake Elsinore to Temecula, Murrieta to Winchester ---- will be assisted.

What once was an effort organized by a list kept on a pad of paper, or under the ball cap Mighell always wears, is now a highly computerized operation.



For almost two decades Denny Mighell, his wife and a group of volunteers that make up the nonprofit group Temecula Valley People Helping People have made Christmas bright for needy children. This year, they provided Christmas gifts for more than 6,000 area children. (Photo by Don Boomer - Staff Photographer)



Volunteer Kristine Turner sorts children's gifts at the Temecula Valley People Helping People warehouse last week. (Photo by Don Boomer - Staff Photographer)

Children are referred to his group from family aid organizations, school districts, the Riverside County court system, foster care agencies, Boys & Girls Clubs, friends, neighbors and others.

Mighell has witnessed many ups and downs over the years, but said there has never been a year like 2008.

Donations way off

Looking around the 20,000-square-foot warehouse space in Temecula donated by next-door neighbor Magnecomp Corp., signs of a weak economy are obvious.

"I'd say donations have been off 50 (percent) to 60 percent over what we usually do," Mighell said. "It's just been tough out there."

Even with donations down, there was plenty to do late last week. A cadre of volunteers worked collecting toys, then sorting and tagging the gifts as the holiday approached.

Debbie Cregut of the Temecula Fire Department arrived with donations from the department's "Spark of Love" toy drive to be distributed.

"We formed an alliance several years ago with People Helping People to make sure everyone gets something," she said.

Marianne Parker, a code enforcement officer for Temecula, spent her day off making the rounds of collection bins and visiting with benefactors.

"I just got \$300," she said gleefully, waving a check over her head. "And I've got a truck full (of donations) outside."

Requests for help poured in.

At midday Friday, Mighell had 288 messages on his phone he hadn't been able to get to.

The goal was to have everything out of the warehouse by Monday and into the hands of the groups and volunteers who distribute the gifts.

"We should be able to have something for everyone," Mighell said. "It won't be as much as last year, but it will be something." Though their main focus is Christmas, People Helping People serves the community all year long. Sometimes it's finding a used car for someone to get to medical appointments, or helping those out of work make ends meet. There are cases every year where money is needed for medical care or funeral expenses.

Over the years, the Mighells often pulled out their own credit cards when donations could not be found elsewhere.

That generosity caught up to Denny and Maryann this year.

Financial difficulties led to the Mighells losing their home during the summer, a house they'd bought 17 years ago.

"We tried to negotiate with the mortgage company, but in the end it just didn't work out," Mighell said.

The couple were able to rent a home across the street.

"I look over there now, and they still haven't been able to sell that house," he said.

Friends have stepped in to help.

"Denny called us and asked if we could help him move," said Bob Brown, a Temecula school board trustee and member of the Temecula Noon Rotary Club. "We had a bunch of people show up and moved his furniture and everything else."



Volunteers Steve Gibson and Jerry Braack unload Christmas trees at the Temecula Valley People Helping People warehouse on Friday. (Photo by Don Boomer - Staff Photographer)

About that same time, the skin condition on her legs Maryann had contracted last year worsened. Inflamed skin caused by a bacterial infection sent her to the hospital for several days and then for extensive and expensive treatment, some covered by insurance, some not.

Though Maryann's condition has improved, the specialists she sees do not have an answer for her condition.

"She's still hurting," Denny said last week. "She wants to come down (to the warehouse) and help, but I won't let her."

A real struggle

Those who have known and worked with Mighell have watched his family struggle this year.

"I don't know how he keeps going," Brown said. "It's a monumental task and he continues to try and do much of it on his own."

The Rotary Club, like many civic groups, has a Christmas program of its own that is assisted by Mighell's group.

The service club, in turn, provides labor and other help collecting and distributing gifts for Mighell's organization.

"Last year, we had a small program where we helped out about 35 families with about 100 kids," Brown said. "This year, we're up to 300 families and about 900 kids. If our program has grown that much, I can only imagine what Denny must be going through."

Without Mighell's help, Brown said, the Rotary Club's program would struggle.

"He means everything to our project," Brown said. "We wouldn't be able to help more than 150 kids without his help."

A quiet day

Mighell said he planned to relax on Christmas Day with his family, including three grandkids, and maybe even go to a movie.

"We're really blessed this year," he said. "I thank God for our friends who have stood behind us all these years."

Across Southwest County on Christmas Day, children who otherwise would not have gifts under the tree have no idea what it took to get them there.

"I just want to make sure they have a Christmas," Mighell said.

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