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2000 - 2014
Giving Dreams an Address

Wonderful Life in Lafayette

... continued from page A1



Local youth groups performed at It's A Wonderful Life in Lafayette.

Photo Gint Federas

It's amazing how much good cheer one city block can hold. The patch of grass in the center of town, along with overflow onto Golden Gate Way was chock full of holiday spirit and friendly neighbors, lots of little ones ready to whisper their wishes to Santa, police officers giving out pencils and candy canes, and the first ever very cool snow globe that families could step into and have their picture taken.

Donica Katayanagi was lined up with son Rocky, 4 and daughter Penny, 6, waiting to chat with the bearded man in red. Apparently the kids are smitten with all things related to the Disney film "Moana." Rocky is planning to ask Santa for a Moana Lego set and Penny would like a Moana princess dress.

This year, the stage was front and center for the Stanley Middle School Chorus, which kicked

things off at 4 p.m.; they were followed by the Lafayette Nursery School, Lamorinda Theatre Academy, Town Hall Theatre and finally the White Horse Youth Corale. Parents, grandparents, and kids found it hard to resist the sing-a-long to classic Christmas tunes that accompanied the tree lighting.

It took a lot of TLC to get the 1922 firetruck up and running to be Santa's special sleigh from its usual home at the Library to Plaza Park, reports Santa's chauffeur, John Kallio. To keep the ruffraff at bay, Santa and Kallio had a police motorcycle escort complete with blaring siren to announce the big man's visit. Right on cue, Bing Crosby crooned "Here Comes Santa Claus" to welcome his arrival.

This festive evening tradition is sponsored by the Dana Green Team and Branagh Development, along

with the Lafayette Chamber, and made possible with the assistance of many volunteers, including Boy Scouts, National Charity League folks, and expert master of ceremonies, Julia Glyde. Thirsty attendees enjoyed complimentary coffee, hot chocolate and apple cider care of Double Perks in Lafayette, and since it was right around dinner time, Mangia had pizza available, and the Chamber sponsored the always-welcome bar. The Green Team and Branagh also generously underwrite the sparkling twinkle lights that add a glowing ambience to the downtown throughout December. It really is a wonderful life in Lafayette, when residents can be grateful for supportive families, Santa comes to town, and there's hot chocolate for everyone.

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Local Volunteers Offer Warm Respite Through Winter Nights

... continued from page A1



Photo provided

"We shopped for, cooked, served and cleaned up breakfast and dinners every day, and also provided food for guests to pack their lunches during the week."

In addition to providing meals, St. Monica volunteers provided tutoring support, playtime and reading for the younger kids, and weekend activities like basketball and kickball. Other congregations have organized trips to places like the Exploratorium. One volunteer from a synagogue in Lafayette takes kids out horseback riding every year.

This year was special for St. Monica because Winter Nights' guests were in Moraga during Halloween. "We were able to get adults and children costumes they liked and have volunteers take them trick-or-treating locally," Stillman said.

"It's all about the kids," said Joanne Peterson, who is a Winter Nights co-chair at a Lafayette synagogue. "Sandy Anderson and Cindy Coleman started the program here and did it for 10 or 11 years. We try to involve as many

congregates as we can, and break down jobs into small pieces so everyone can get involved. We have a huge Christmas Eve party and have Santa in the sanctuary, depending on the age of the kids. One year seven kids were under the age of 5, so we had the preschool host the party."

A program manager works with Winter Nights' families on their goals to help them become self-sustaining and there is a volunteer life coach who helps individuals make plans to remove obstacles that keep them from success, said Stillman. "We have a group called the Traveling Tutors who make sure students get their homework done, encourage reading through reading incentives and communicate with parents about the progress of their children."

Each family sleeps inside their own pop-up tent set up in reception halls, an area off-limits to Winter Nights' volunteers. This allows guests a sense of privacy and a place they can call their own.

"These are people like you and

me that have just fallen on hard times," said Robin Freeberg, who is involved in Winter Nights at her Lamorinda church. "Many of the clients have jobs that pay minimum wage and are unable to sustain themselves in our affluent community."

Since several Winter Nights' clients come from abusive situations, some participant locations in Lamorinda were omitted from this story to ensure client safety.

"People in need do not necessarily come from the poorest of communities," added a Lafayette congregational co-leader, Rick Silvani. "People who previously would be classified as 'middle class' suddenly due to life circumstances can find themselves in need of the support of a program like Winter Nights provides."

"The most challenging aspect," explained Stillman, "is helping folks find housing because there is so little available that is affordable for people with very low incomes." Last year of the 20 families, which totaled 75 individuals, 15 found

housing or shelter, she said.

Jim Reiter, another Winter Nights co-leader at the Lafayette church said, "For many, a lost job, illness, or family separation can result in the need for community assistance."

"All people want is a home, a place where they can rest their head at night and feel safe," added Freeberg.

Reiter believes guests benefit most from the support provided during this very trying time in their lives.

"We set the tone," said Peterson, who partners with Neal Modelsky and Sarah Landes at the synagogue. "This is respite for them. They may have moved eight times by the time they get to the temple.

The first Monday, they're exhausted. We reinforce that this is their space and give the commitment to make them comfortable. We've had evenings when we sent (volunteers) home because it can all be so overwhelming (for guests)."

The good news is the kids, said Peterson. "Those kids don't care that their parents are stressed out or overwhelmed. They pop out of the tent area and are ready to play. The kids pick up on the genuineness of our volunteers."

None of the drama surrounding the guests surprises Peterson. "It's the human heart stuff that surprises me, and these families' endurance surprises me," she said.

"These people are survivors."

Winter Nights' Wish List

There are several ways the community can help Winter Nights' families. Clients who have cars use gas cards, and the ones who don't often need BART and bus cards. Target and WalMart cards are used as parent incentives (such as a good report card or a child doing extra cleaning in the shelter). And Winter Nights uses movie tickets as incentive for the kids' reading program.

Other needs include:

- Tents, 10 by 10 feet, new or gently used;
- AA batteries, flashlights;
- Umbrellas;
- Automobiles;
- Packing or duct tape, and industrial dispenser for packing tape;
- Sleeping bags;
- Umbrella strollers (single and double);
- Car seats and booster seats;
- Pillows, twin size plastic mattress covers;
- Non-zipper, fitted single sheets;
- Sanitary wipes; and
- Wardrobe boxes (24 by 21 by 48 inches).

For information, contact Judith Stillman at (925) 933-9351.