

Hometown News
By Jamye Durrance
Staff writer

Speedway, NASCAR employees create a Christmas for homeless teens



VOLUSIA COUNTY - For most children and teenagers, the excitement of Christmas Day is all in the morning activity of waking up and ripping open the presents under the tree while surrounded by family.

But, for more than 1,200 homeless children in Volusia County, Christmas morning this year didn't include a tree, presents, a family or a home.

Some were recently displaced by a fire while others have been homeless for months, said Pam Woods, a Daytona Beach City Commissioner and homeless liaison for Volusia County Schools.

Despite the obstacles, Santa found 25 of those homeless teens, giving them a Christmas they didn't expect.

Employees from the International Speedway Corporation and NASCAR played Santa, buying everything on the wish lists for the teens, all students at high schools throughout the county.

"(The teens) most likely would have no Christmas," said Donna Sue Sanders, Community Affairs Director for International Speedway Corporation.

The 1,100 employees at the Speedway and NASCAR offices all received e-mails with the wish lists for the teens, with requests for everything from clothes to video games to books. Each department adopted one teen, buying everything on the wish list.

One week before Christmas, the employees wrapped all the presents and Ms. Woods delivered them to each student.

"Some are just so excited, they open them right there," Ms. Woods said. "They are so appreciative."

The employees focused on teens because they are often forgotten during the holiday season because of the focus on younger children in shelters, Ms. Woods said.

Ms. Sanders said each gift sack contained at least one new outfit for the teens.

Being surrounded by all the latest fashions and gadgets at school can be hard on the teens.

"For a high school or middle school student, wearing that new outfit makes them feel good about themselves," she said. "It gives them a whole new mindset."

Ms. Sanders said the sour economic situation and her company's own recent layoffs didn't diminish the giving from her coworkers.

"This brings out the holiday spirit the most," she said. "There was absolutely no indication of anyone giving less. I was overwhelmed by the response."

The program started last year with 16 teens and Ms. Woods and Ms. Sanders said they plan to continue it again next year, possibly with more students.

"It is just a great program," Ms. Sanders said. "We continue to realize the need."