

DECEMBER

Shop with a Cop celebrates 10 years of giving to community

By Max Denning
The Observer, Dec. 12

Ten-year-old Lakota Hughes walks swiftly through the electronics section in Walmart, leading Union County Sheriff's Deputy Dane Jensen, who is pushing a shopping cart containing presents she has picked out for her family members.

Lakota is taking part in the La Grande Police Department's 10th annual Shop with a Cop event. She overhears LGPD Sergeant Kris Rasmussen mention to Jensen the children can also get a Christmas tree if their families don't have one. Lakota looks up at Jensen.

"So we're going to get a tree for my mommy?" she asks, her dress adorned with a Christmas tree.

"Yep," Jensen responds with a smile. "How's that?"

"Good!" Lakota exclaims as she resumes her search for the perfect gifts with extra pep in her step.

Lakota, a student at Island City Elementary School, was one of the 15 children from five local schools participating in this year's Shop with a Cop

event, which is sponsored by the LGPD. Officers from the LGPD, the Union County Sheriff's Office and the Oregon State Police all take part in the event. The children are chosen by school counselors at their respective schools, and they each receive \$100 to buy Christmas presents for their family. After they are finished shopping, the children drop their presents off with volunteers who wrap them, then they eat lunch with the cop they shopped with.

When the program began in 2009, the police department received a \$1,000 grant from Walmart. Now the program receives a \$2,000 grant from Walmart and between \$1,000 and \$2,000 from community members and business contributions.

LGPD Sergeant Jason Hays, who coordinates the event, said the officers look forward to Shop with a Cop.

"As far as the officers are concerned, this is the one thing we do out of the entire year where the entire thing is positive," Hays said. "Spending that one-on-one

time with children is very positive, and we are doing that in a fun environment."

OSP Trooper Kainoa Delatori has been participating in the shopping event for three years and said he enjoys volunteering for it.

"On a normal workday, when someone sees us, whether it's an adult or a kid, they automatically think negatively, whether that's from what they see on TV or what they see in the community," Delatori said. "When we get to interact with kids like this in a positive light, take pictures, run around Walmart, (and) they get to go pick out Christmas gifts — there's nothing negative about it."

Shop with a Cop gives children a positive early impression of police officers, the state trooper added.

"It shows them (at a young age that) interaction with law enforcement doesn't always have to be negative," Delatori said.

Delatori was paired with Damian Picard, a 10-year-old who attends Central Elementary School. He said he had fun shopping.

"I had never shopped

with a cop before," Damian said.

Officers weren't the only ones helping the children shop. Chief Brian Harvey joined in on the fun as well. Harvey has taken part in the event since he became chief nine years ago. He said the event is refreshing for cops.

"It's reaffirming to be able to help give kids a season of hope," he said.

While the event started before Harvey became chief, he said he had no hesitations about continuing the practice when he joined the LGPD.

"When they told me what they were doing and what it was all about, I was 100 percent on board," Harvey said. "It's a great, great outreach program."

Shop with a Cop events can be found across Oregon and around the country, though it's not clear where the tradition started. Hays said the LGPD was inspired to put on the event by the Redmond Police Department.

Approximately 35 volunteers help put on the event, which is a partnership



Cherise Kaechele/The Observer

Lakota Hughes and UCSO Dep. Dane Jensen discuss the next item on Lakota's gift list at Walmart on Dec. 11.

between LGPD, Walmart and Loveland Funeral Home. Over the past 10 years, the event has served 150 children in the area. The children hail from La Grande Middle School, Central Elementary School, Greenwood Elementary School, Island City Elementary School and the La Grande School District's Rising Stars program.

While the children get to do the shopping, Harvey said they aren't the only ones reaping rewards from

the event.

"It's just powerful. It's revitalizing for us and reminds us why we do this job. We deal with a world that has a lot of sorrow and tragedy and we see a lot of that firsthand. Having this experience for us is really helpful. We benefit from it as much as the kids do."

Anyone who wishes to make a donation to this event can contact Carla Greenough at the La Grande Police Department 541-963-1017

LHS FBLA participates in annual 12 Days of Christmas

By Dick Mason, The Observer, Dec. 17

Members of La Grande High School's Future Business Leaders of American-made are making some of the most meaningful deliveries of their lives this Christmas season. Deliveries to families the students may never meet but will forever remember.

The LHS students are participating in the FBLA chapter's annual 12 Days of Christmas program. Three families in need are chosen, and the students deliver gifts each afternoon around 4 p.m. for 12 days. The students made their first delivery of gifts on Dec. 14 and will make their final gift run on Dec. 23.

"It is really awesome that they have such a giving spirit. It is a spirit we all should live by," said business teacher Mark Carollo, the adviser of LHS's FBLA chapter.

The gifts provided to the families are all wrapped at LHS and then delivered covertly. The students place their wrapped packages on the doorsteps of the family's home, knock on the doors and then quickly run away. They will never reveal who they are to the families.

"(The anonymity) adds to the sense of mystery and excitement," said Lara Insko, president of the LHS chapter.

The junior said everyone delivering gifts wears Santa hats to add to the Christmas spirit.

Insko and her FBLA 12 Days of Christmas team know that each of the families have three or four school-age children but

have little other information about them.

One of the things Insko said she sometimes wishes she knew about the families is the type and size of their ovens. This would make it a lot easier to pick out the best food items to deliver.

Some of the children are caught on to the delivery schedule of the FBLA students.

"They are waiting for us when we arrive," Insko said. "The kids have fun with it."

The LHS junior, regardless of whether or not someone is waiting, makes her deliveries quickly and scurries back to her car, trying to keep the sense of magic alive. Once back in her car Insko sometimes cannot resist taking a peek as children reach for their family's gift package.

"The children are really excited and happy," Insko said.

The LHS chapter selects a theme for each of the 12 delivery days. The theme for Day 3 is "Santa's Sleigh," which symbolizes gifts for children. LHS's FBLA chapter, in keeping with this theme, on that day will provide gifts of Play-Doh, soccer balls and basketballs.

The Day 9 theme is

"Silent Night," and board games will be given. "Christmas Colors" is the theme of Day 10, during which colored pencils, markers and coloring books are delivered.

Many of the gifts are prepared by FBLA chapter members, including baked items and clothing.

Insko said participating in the program is a way for everyone in LHS's FBLA chapter to show appreciation for what others have done for them.

"We receive so much help from the community, (and) we are trying to give back," she said.

The 12 Days of Christmas program is one of many community service projects the LHS FBLA chapter is involved in. The others include a fundraising campaign for the March of Dimes and the baking and distribution of Thanksgiving pies to families in need.

"The FBLA is dedicated to serving. We do a lot of things to help the community," Insko said.

Carollo is impressed with the initiative the members of his FBLA chapter are showing in running the annual gift-giving program.

"When you give them some direction, they run with it. It is awesome,"

Firefighters shop with children

By Cherise Kaechele
The Observer, Dec. 19

Students from Island City Elementary School walked up and down the aisles at Walmart looking for gifts for their family (and, happily, for themselves). They chatted excitedly with their chaperones — La Grande Rural Firefighter volunteers, for the department's eighth annual Shop with a Firefighter.

Smaller in scale and profile than Shop with a Cop, this event isn't as well known around the community. But the generosity that drives Shop with a Firefighter and the good will accomplished are considerable.

La Grande Rural Fire Capt. Anthony Swales said eight students were chosen by the Island City teachers and are given \$100 to spend for Christmas gifts. The money comes primarily from the volunteer association's pancake breakfast held during the summer.

"We've been doing this for eight years, but we used to do the shopping for the kids ourselves," Swales said as he followed Josh Lopez, 11 years old, through the aisles. "Five years ago, we started taking the kids with us."

Swales and the six other firefighter volunteers took the eight students shopping in two groups — and, as a bonus, they picked the children up in fire trucks.

"This is the way we provide and give back to our community," Swales said. "This event is specifically for our (fire) district."

It's not always about fighting fires, he said. This is a way for the volunteers to bring joy to the children who live in their district.

"If it brings a smile to



Cherise Kaechele/The Observer

La Grande Rural Fire Captain Anthony Swales helps bag the items the children purchased. The firefighters wrapped the items and delivered them to the families, as well.

their faces, then we're all for it," he said.

Josh stood in the toy section of Walmart debating what to get himself for Christmas. The decision was between a scooter and a Razor, similar ride-on toys. "Do you have a helmet?" Swales asked, noting one toy was potentially more dangerous and would require more protection.

Several aisles over, Jordan Sain, 8 years old, was looking for bike gear for her uncle. She said he rides a lot, and at night. She also listed having to get her fish a present, too.

Chris Stauffer and Joe Boyle, both volunteer firefighters who shopped with the students, said this event allows them to do something for their community outside of the normal parameters of the job.

"It's the right thing to do," Stauffer said. "Every kid deserves a gift to open on Christmas."

Boyle said giving back to the community gives back

to the firefighters a sense of humility.

This is the kind of action that Christmas is really all about, he added. It brings Christmas cheer.

It was recently announced that the department's fire chief would be stepping down — Swales has been the volunteer association president for the last 10 years, encompassing the eight years of Shop with a Firefighter. The volunteers are determined that the event will continue, and Swales said the fire department will always have Shop with a Firefighter.

This year, the association received an appreciated donation from Certified Personnel Service Agency Inc. to go toward the event. While the pancake breakfast — held during the summer — is the primary source of fundraising, donations are always welcome. To make a donation, call the rural fire department at 541-963-6895.

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