

CHRISTMAS LISTS *from page 1A*

Throughout the bay, Christmas tablecloths decorated half a dozen tables for the families to sit at. Folding chairs filled out the rest of the room, all facing the Christmas tree.

“It took hours and hours, days and days to wrap all of those,” an organizer said, referring to the presents under the tree. There were hundreds of them, wrapped in various styles. The line of presents stretched at least 40 feet and was eight feet tall in sections.

A dedicated crew had been working on wrapping the presents for the last week. An entire team of people were needed to set everything up that night for the 39 kids in attendance, aged 12 to 18.

Twin Lakes’ program, started by Ambrosio, is geared toward teenagers on the economic fringes. Some had fallen on hard times, kids being raised by grandparents. Others were hit by the fiscal realities of rural life.

Ambrosio has the kids fill out Christmas wish lists, which she hangs on a tree at her store, Twin Lakes Market. People throughout the community take the lists and buy the gifts or donate money for Ambrosio to buy the gifts.

This year, there was a particularly strong windfall of community donations, allowing her to get the kids everything they needed.

“People from Florence came specifically to help out with money,” one volunteer said. “We had checks, we had cash. It was really awesome. We even had kids come and donate cash that were in the program. This thing is going to grow.”

The first two teenagers of the night walked in with their family. They sat at one of the tables and played UNO as they chatted with the volunteers.

Just 10 minutes later, the room was filled with over 100 people.

Promptly at 6, Ambrosio stood in front of the crowd.

“I just want to say that people went all-out crazy this year,” she said as the crowd cheered. “The community really came together. I can’t tell you how many people came into the store and said, ‘Oh, I got carried away!’ ... In the future, I hope things will go good for you guys, so you can do something like this for your communities. One person can make a difference, and don’t let people tell you otherwise.”



This year’s Twin Lakes Giving Tree provided not only presents donated by the community for area teens, but boxes of food and socks hung on a mantle, filled with additional treats, at the Sutton Lake Fire Station.

Stockings were first, with the teens grabbing their socks and taking them back to their families. All sorts of candies and mementos were pored over as children began to laugh. It’s at that point Ambrosio and her team started yelling out the kid’s names.

“DO I HAVE A... (insert name)?”

The volunteers, arms full of bundles of presents, wound their way through the crowd to deliver packages to each teen.

It’s at this point things got loud.

“OH MY GOD!!!! BATTLE ROYALE!” one kid yelled as he opened a present, revealing a video game.

One boy stared at a long present that was almost as tall as him. He tore of the wrapping: A huge box of Stover’s Candy. He looked like a deer in the headlights, smiling in awe.

“He was the most excited about the food,” a family member explained, looking at the plethora of toys that surrounded the boys.

The calling of names continued.

“HEY!” the volunteered yelled.

“HEY!” the kids yelled back, laughing.

The volunteer called out another name.

“THAT’S ME!” the kid said, spelling out their name.

Each family had different rules set

in place. For some, it was an utter free for all: Open everything. Others just opened one present, leaving the rest for Christmas morning.

“Oh my GOD!” one boy said as he peered inside a box at a set of markers. This was just moments after he had opened an ornate set of pencils and sketch books, which he screamed with glee about. The markers seemed to be the pinnacle of excitement. It’s at that point parental control had to be exerted.

“Now, understand that none of this gets done in the bedroom, living room, or any place that there’s carpet,” his father said.

Unwrapping styles varied from kid to kid. There were the careful ones, who picked slowly at the tape, not wanting to damage the wrapping. Others just tore in with abandon. One enterprising teenager had the unwrapping game down pat. They had a long rectangular present in which they placed both of their palms on, hard. With the flick of their wrists, the wrapping came off instantly.

One boy opened up a package, revealing the 40-year-old electronic game of Simon. He was confused.

“What is this?” he asked a family member.

The woman knew the game well,

laughing.

“You have to remember the colors. It’s a memory game, you’ll love it.”

Off in the corner, quietly, a mother and her daughter unwrapped presents while sitting side by side on the floor. They laughed with each surprise and talked about what the girl would do with the presents. Amid the chaos that surrounded them, it was if they were in their own world. Almost every time the daughter carefully unwrapped the presents, the mother looked at her daughter’s face and smiled softly.

“Oh Sh--!” one boy yelled as he opened a package of sketch pencils. “Oh, man, these are nice ones!” he exclaimed before saying he had to show them off to his friends.

“This is probably going to be their only Christmas,” one woman said, looking on as her grandchildren were talking with friends. Money was tight. Their father, who couldn’t make it that night, was studying to be an EMT.

“He’s going to be a fireman!” she proudly said.

Many of the families began to pack up for the night.

“Dude, we got so much stuff!” one kid said. “No, literally, this is the biggest Christmas I’ve had!”

Some of the kids had received backpacks and began stuffing everything

they could into them: the candy from the stocking stuffers, the smaller gifts.

“Do you have an extra bag?” one woman asked. Her family had opted to only open one present a piece, leaving the others for Christmas morning. The trash bags had already been used for discarded wrapping paper. Someone had a novel suggestion:

“They can wrap them up in a table cloth. Like a Santa sack.”

The family put the presents in the middle of the cloth, folded it up, and tied it neatly.

As one family was leaving, a teenager pulled his mother aside.

“Mom, I just want to say thank you for being here with me. I love you,” he said, embracing her. He was taller than she was, her chin resting on his shoulder. She held him tight.

By 7 p.m., the station was nearly empty. Tables were being folded up, the room was almost bare. Firefighters were sweeping the floors.

“Look at that,” Ambrosio said with a sigh. “It happened that fast.”

She had just folded up an inflatable Christmas tree, green with blinking lights inside. It was one of the last of the decorations, and it was as if the chaos had never happened.

“I know, right?” Ambrosio agreed, heading over to clean the snack table.

She pondered the night — the long hours of work organizing, raising funds, wrapping the packages and decorating the fire station. It was all worth it.

“We had one kid who asked for the book ‘Don Quixote.’ The actual book. Cool, right?” she said. “The person who bought the book wanted to meet the kid. So, I went to the kids and asked, ‘Who likes Don Quixote?’ Most of them didn’t know what I was talking about. One kid was, BOOM! ‘THAT’S ME, I LOVE DON QUIXOTE!’”

She said that, on average, each teenager received around 10 presents, including the food box and stockings. Some had close to 20. It just all depended on what they asked for.

Some people who bought the kids presents “got carried away,” she said. Sometimes, people buy only a few presents for the teen they select from Twin Lakes. But this time, people seemed to just want to buy everything.

“They came back and said, ‘I just wanted to give my kid more.’ That’s what they called them — ‘My kid.’”



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541-902-0304
PO Box 739, Florence, Oregon 97439