

## EPISCOPAL CONGREGATIONS “LOVE THY NEIGHBOR”

*Written by Barbara Cavazos*

Good Samaritan Community Services is located on the west side of San Antonio and the buildings throughout the campus are painted in festive colors, but on Tuesday, December 22, 2009, brightly colored re-useable shopping bags, filled with the making of a Christmas feast, covered the floor of one of the large activity rooms. Their purpose would outshine the bright colors that surrounded them. Six hundred bags had been gathered from Episcopal Churches throughout the city and were waiting to be picked up by families serviced by “Good Sam,” which also includes 100 senior citizens. This agency began in 1951, and for that many years has been a support system for thousands of low income families living in the area.

Distribution would begin at 10:00 in the morning and would last for two days, but the work to accomplish this drive had been going on for months. Several months earlier, local Episcopal Churches were advised of the upcoming “Christmas Bag” Program and invited to participate. The invitation included a list of items needed for each bag. The overwhelming results were obvious when one walked into that room that had become distribution headquarters.

When the invitation reached Holy Spirit, Jeanne Loggie volunteered to take on the responsibility of coordinating our participation with the Christmas Bags. She provided copies of the lists on Sunday mornings and members of Holy Spirit enthusiastically embraced the challenge. A total of 46 bags, one for each two members, were turned in by the congregation, as well as a large box containing 48 individual toys and various holiday items. Wanting to do something more, our priest, Jason Roberts, offered to bless the bags before they were distributed and his offer was graciously accepted by the CSCS staff. This would be the first time there would be a formal blessing of the Christmas Bags.

I arrived at 8:30 to get a start on this article for our Holy Spirit newsletter and quickly got caught up in the hustle and bustle of preparation. Donna Pacheco, staff member with the GSCS Senior Services Center for eight years, greeted me and introduced me to her two grandsons, who she recruited to assist in the distribution. Their main responsibility would be to carry bags to the parking lot for those who needed help. Twelve-year-old Joshua, a student at Jordan Middle School, and Sean, 11, who goes to Rhodes Middle School, dressed in Santa hats and matching plaid shirts, were eager to get things started.

Scotty McDaniel, Volunteer Coordinator and Development Director for GSCS, welcomed me and explained the distribution system that would require many volunteers. Frozen chickens were on their way and one had to be added to each of the 600 bags before distribution began. A table set up at the doorway of the bag-filled room would be the distribution point. The table would be manned by GSCS staff and volunteers, including Elda, a young mother who was part of the agency’s work force development program, *Get2Work*. Two lines would form in the courtyard, according to the letters of the last name on a registration form turned

in weeks earlier. The highly organized manual system was in place with notebooks holding the alphabetized forms. Registrants would turn in a green registration slip to be matched to the form in the notebooks and after it was checked off, would receive their Christmas Bag.

While we were waiting for the boxes of chicken to be delivered, I paid a visit to the Senior Center where a dozen seniors were sitting around tables in the main activity room, enjoying coffee, *pan dulce* and fellowship. I went over to admire the 10-ft. Christmas tree in the corner of room, covered with hand made ornaments. Lois Cura, a participant in the senior activities for four years, proudly offered to show me the craft room in the Senior Center, where, among other creations, all of the ornaments on the tree had been made.

By 9:30, people began to arrive for the distribution, as well as my fellow “Holy Spiriters:” Jason and Susannah Roberts, James and Tawni Garcia, Pat McCarty, Alfredo and Zunilda Castillo and Jeanne and John Loggie and their children, Allie and Sam. The 15-minute service began in the room where the bags were stored. People waiting outside came in to participate in the service, including Good Samaritan CEO Jill Oettinger and Executive Assistant Bette Boyd. The words to be used in the service were passed out to make participation easier. The service started with a prayer by Scotty, a scripture reading by James and the singing of three carols, accompanied by James on the guitar. Jason concluded the service with a short blessing over the fruits of Christian love for others, in accordance with Christ’s commandment. This service truly made the event a moving experience, so much that Scotty and Jason are willing to make it a part of the Christmas Bag Program from now on.

Immediately after the blessing, activity accelerated. Every one from Holy Spirit joined other volunteers and the distribution began. Elda and Scotty worked the table and each took a line, checking off recipients as they picked up their bag. James, Tawni, Pat, Jeanne and Alfredo bagged the frozen chickens into a protective plastic bag. Five-year-old Malachai, volunteering with his foster mother, carried the bagged chickens to Susannah, Zunilda and me, where we added them to the grocery bags. *We couldn’t keep up with Malachai.* Sam and Allie moved bags to the doorway and John helped load bags into carts. Even the younger children of the volunteers had a job to do when they were given Christmas pictures to color. After they wrote a prayer on the back, the papers were added to the bags.

The toys were also added to the bags of families with children. Scotty smiled as she picked out a toy and placed it in a bag for the mother of a four-year-old girl who had been with the Center’s Child Development Program since infancy. Older children, including Sean and Joshua, carried bags or pushed loaded carts to the parking lot. The lines were orderly and multigenerational; parents with children, grandparents with grandchildren, with the younger ones often helping the older ones. Many were dressed in bright holiday garb, adding to the festive feel of the season. By 11:00 the long lines had subsided and the rush was over, giving workers time to take a break and enjoy the Mexican hot chocolate provided for

them in a large jug. Volunteers and the Good Samaritan staff would maintain the distribution throughout the day until 6 p.m. and start up again at 10 a.m. on Wednesday.

Bette Boyd said the Christmas Bag drive was officially organized in 1998, but its “unorganized” ancestor began many years prior to that. Because there are so many organizations collecting toys, Good Sam concentrates only on food collection, but often toys are included in the bags and are distributed to the children. Scotty gives all the credit for the success of this year’s drive to the participating San Antonio Episcopal Churches: Holy Spirit, St. Thomas, St. Mark’s, Christ Church, St. Michael’s, St. Andrew’s, St. Luke’s, Reconciliation, St. Steven’s and Holy Cross. Trinity Church, Pharr, St. John’s McAllen and St. James, Hebbbronville support a similar program conducted by GSCS Rio Grande Valley in Pharr.

I was only supposed to write a newsletter article, but I received so much more. I met really loving people in the staff of Good Sam. I met children who would be taking the right road because of the programs Good Sam offers the community. I met teenage parents who would be able to give their children more because of Good Sam’s restart and educational programs. I met families who would have a good, traditional Christmas because of the generosity of others. I watched little ones like Sam and Allie and Malachai work as hard as any adult. I watched pre-teens and teens joyfully and devotedly work to benefit others less fortunate. I met seniors who could get out of the house and share time and activity with other seniors. I watched a community of neighbors greet each other as friends, not just concentrating on what they were about to receive, but helping others. And, for a full five minutes, I watched Father Jason Roberts line dance with twelve seniors and their instructor in the Senior Center. The true Spirit of Christmas was alive in west San Antonio this day. Merry Christmas Everyone.