

Girl Scouts serve others with holiday drive

By BARBARA S. ROTHSCHILD • Courier-Post Staff • December 28, 2008

MOUNT LAUREL — Girl Scout Troop 26739 doesn't just believe in expanding its horizons beyond Mount Laurel -- it also is committed to helping others as it does so.

The Senior Girl Scout troop -- made up of nine Lenape High School and Bishop Eustace Preparatory School freshmen from Mount Laurel who have been scouts together since they began as Brownies in second grade -- recently held its second annual holiday party for 100 Camden families.

The toy drive they held in conjunction with the party was so successful that even with each child there receiving at least two gifts, there were enough toys left over for Santa Claus to deliver to an additional 30 families.

The girls also collected hats, gloves, school supplies, gift cards for parents, and even baked cookies that children could decorate at the Dec. 20 party held at Camden Fraternal Order of Police Lodge #1.

"This is very special. Without the Girl Scouts giving to the children of Camden, at least 80 percent of these children would not receive another gift," said Gerry Taylor, program director of the Camden County Office of Economic Opportunity's Urban Women's Center.

Troop co-leaders Julie Williamson and Jackie Smoyer began coordinating the coat drive with Taylor when the girls were still Junior Scouts and interested in achieving the Bronze Award -- the highest award given to Juniors, usually for community service done as a troop.

Smoyer suggested the coat drive.

"That first year, the girls hoped to collect 50 coats and ended up with 500," Williamson said.

The troop expanded the drive the following year, getting the entire Mount Laurel Girl Scout community involved.

"So far, we have distributed over 10,000 coats to the Camden community," Williamson said.

Having earned their Bronze Award, the girls planned the holiday party to attain the Silver Award during their final year as Cadettes, the next level of Girl Scouts.

"Gerry called and said the Women's Center did this party each year, but hoped that our girls could add a spark. We approached them with the idea and they came up with some amazing things to do," Williamson said.

The troop members divided into teams that were responsible for a toy drive, a hat and mitten drive, crafts and activities, games, and decorations/entertainment.

The Urban Women's Center provided wish lists from the families and children it services, so the scouts could make sure each child got a toy on his or her list.

The troop also solicited corporate donations last year. This year, with the economy hurting, there was a worry that [money](#) and toy donations would suffer.

It enlisted Mount Laurel Junior Girl Scout Troop 23698 and Boy Scout Troop 15 to distribute fliers and collect more toys. More than 1,300 toy fliers and 350 hat and mitten fliers went out.

"We collected at least 500 toys. Mount Laurel was very generous. It was humbling," Williamson said.

For this year's party, the girls took on different roles than they had last year.

"I was really excited at the children's reactions when they got their gifts," said Rachael Weiss, 14, a Bishop Eustace freshman who made cookies this year for the children to decorate.

Bishop Eustace freshman Allie Salisbury, 14, helped the young partygoers make snowman and mitten ornaments.

"You can see the kids never made arts and crafts before. It's a privilege to teach these children how to do this," Allie said.

Other scouts played "reindeer games" with the youngsters.

"It was fun teaching simple games and dances we grew up with, like "Cotton Eye Joe." We take a lot of things for granted," said Lenape freshman Courtney Smoyer, 14.

The girls watched Benjamin Baylor, who turned 4 on Christmas Day, play with his new firetruck, cars and Transformer.

"The kids really had an amazing time," said Benjamin's mother, Katrina Goldsmith, 32, who attended the party for the first time this year and held Benjamin's new Gap hat and gloves.

"They had music, the cookies were delicious, and all the kids got along so well. The Girl Scouts were interactive and reached out to the other kids. That was beautiful, too," Goldsmith said.

Girl Scouts of America will reward the troop members' efforts this holiday season with required leadership hours, but there are other, less tangible rewards, as well.

"This shows the girls that the world is a big place where they can accomplish anything. Running the coat drive and the party shows them that they can be very powerful. We are enjoying watching them grow into strong leadership roles," Williamson said.



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