

'I feel like a magical elf'

Frankfort school delivers for those less fortunate

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In a scene reminiscent of a famous North Pole workshop, Santa's young helpers hustled through the halls of Hickory Creek Middle School sorting more than 600 brightly wrapped gifts — all destined to be delivered to deserving children.

"I feel like a magical elf," Frank Ciatteo, a sixth-grader at the Frankfort school, said as he bagged up the packages this month.

For a hectic 30 minutes, 280 sixth-graders emptied Renee Grady's classroom, where presents were piled on every desk and chair, and placed them all in carefully labeled plastic bags to be trucked to specific classrooms at Cesar E. Chavez Multicultural Academic Center.

Located in Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood, the school is in a community of recent immigrants from Mexico, Latin America and Poland, and has a 99.8 percent poverty rate.

In what Grady referred to as "organized chaos," every sixth-grader had a job to do on sorting day. In assembly line fashion, they checked to make sure every gift was properly labeled, passed it into the waiting hands of others who found the appropriate bag to place it in, while others held open the bags and secured them when full.

All of the gifts had been donated by Hickory Creek students and staff. It's the 10th year the sixth-graders have been involved in a Letters to Santa program, and the seventh year for partnering with Chavez School, Grady said.

Each year, the program has grown — from 65 presents the first year, to almost 10 times that.

"I didn't mean to start a program," an exhausted Grady said at the end of this huge sorting event.

Ten years ago, she brought in a couple of letters to Santa written by less fortunate kids and tried to fulfill their holiday wishes. Soon, others wanted them, too. It grew to include all sixth-graders, and is now open to



Hickory Creek Middle School sixth-graders carry one of the presents that will be donated to the Cesar E. Chavez Multicultural Academic Center in Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood. | JOSEPH P. MEIER-SUN TIMES MEDIA

the entire school.

It couldn't happen without the generosity of the Frankfort community and parent volunteers, she said.

For the past seven years, Chavez students have written letters to Santa, which are diverted from the North Pole to Hickory Creek Middle School. Frankfort students read through and select one or two letters, shop for the items on their wish lists, wrap them and stack them in Grady's classroom.

Grady has made this holiday effort part of the school's Character Counts program, in which they focus on caring.

Outside her classroom door is a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "Life's most persistent question is: 'What are we doing for others?'"

Her students have embraced that heartily and cheerfully.

"This is real for them," Grady said. "I believe kids learn best when it is a hands-on experience."

Brooke Wolford picked three letters to Santa.

"I wanted to help more than one, because there's a lot of them," she said.

Danielle Skopick took two letters home because her class was trying to fulfill the wishes of one entire

class at Chavez.

"It was fun picking out what they wanted," she said.

"We bought as many things on the list as we could," said Rachel Dal Bianco, another sixth-grader. "It's really fun to know we are helping people who would not have presents of their own. They wrote really cute letters."

The letters — mostly hand-written, except for those from kindergarten students, who used a typed form letter — all included three modest requests. Many wanted coats and boots and school supplies, but dolls and cars also were popular items.

"I wish if you can get me a toy for my baby sister and I would like some Monster high dolls. Thank you have a good day," penned 7-year-old Deylin.

Others let Santa know how good they have been all year.

"I always come to school every day. I always bring my homework to school. I do good on my math test at my school. Can I get Bunnice books to read at home please?" wrote 7-year-old Alejandro.

Some letters were "sad," sixth-grader Justin Paull said.

"Most did not ask for presents. They asked for coats and clothes, not toys," Paull said.

"I get chills reading the letters,"

said Karen Anderson, mother of two Hickory Creek students. "All one kid wanted was a teddy bear and crayons. Simple things make them happy."

"It's fun to shop. We try to get as much as we can for the money," said another parent volunteer, Marni Vaundry. Her sixth-grader picked out a Spider-Man coat for their Chavez student.

"If they don't have a coat, you know they don't have hats and mittens," said Vaundry, who included those items as well, even if they weren't on the list.

Frankfort students are asked to limit their gifts to \$25 so that all will be equal for Chavez students, who open the gifts during a holiday party at their school, Grady said.

Grady has been at Chavez when the gifts are distributed, and she has extra coats and toys on hand to be sure every child receives a gift.

"The first year, I cried," she said.

There are families who are homeless, who need blankets and warm clothes. Last year, there was a single mother of three who was battling cancer and unable to work.

"We looked at the extras we had and gave them to that family," she said. "Every year, it's something different."