

Giving spirit unites St. Mary's, Vacaville firefighters

By [Richard Bammer](#), *The Reporter*, Vacaville

POSTED: 12/20/14, 8:45 PM PST |



Vacaville firefighters Mike Mike Donnelly (left) and Josh LaRoe pass out toys to kids at an apartment complex on Alamo Drive on Saturday. After collecting over 1,000 toys, firefighters gave out toys to families in need at St. Mary's Catholic Church and also visited two apartment complexes. Joel Rosenbaum -- The Reporter



Instead of a sleigh, Santa Claus arrives in a vintage fire engine as he helps Vacaville Firefighters deliver toys to an apartment complex on Alamo Drive as part of their annual toy drive. Joel Rosenbaum -- The Reporter

If casual visitors walked past St. Mary's Catholic Church on Saturday morning, they might wonder if heaven itself had come down to Earth.

Bells pealed, but they did not originate from the Vacaville church's steeples. These were higher-pitched, gentle, giving off roughly the same vibration as, say, the sound of harps.

Upon closer inspection, around the west side of the Stinson Avenue house of worship, the sound's origin came into clear view: some 10 handbell ringers, each clad in red sweatshirts, from the Community Presbyterian Church.

They played “Jolly Old St. Nicholas,” a soothing tune that fit together, like ribbons and bows on wrapped gifts, with the seasonal mood of the charitable activities going on in the adjacent parking lot.

There, for nearly two hours, dozens of off-duty and retired Vacaville firefighters from Local 3501 of the International Association of Fire Fighters — and their families — passed out Christmas toys stacked high on department vehicles to needy families that, in turn, also picked up a free cardboard boxful of fresh and packaged food, including a frozen turkey and other fixings for a holiday feast.

As they have for the past 16 years, the firefighter volunteers and others have doled out at least one toy, age- and gender-appropriate, per child, to members of about 150 families who signed up to receive food at the St. Mary’s Food Locker (later in the day, firefighters drove fire vehicles through some of the city’s poorer neighborhoods, dispensing gifts along the way). For some of the older children, they handed out gift cards, all the gifts, some 1,000 toys and cards, collected during the past several weeks, an effort which is aligned with the city’s Christmas Wish program, said firefighter Matt Moreno, who helped to organize the drive.

At 10 a.m., dozens of cars lined up in the church parking lot and some were waiting to pull in from Stinson, but traffic moved steadily throughout the morning.

A jolly red-suited fat man, who identified himself only as Kriss Kringle, refusing to provide his suspected alias, helped to hand out the toys, stuffed animals and bicycles to dolls and games, to drivers and passengers who rolled down their windows or opened their back hatches or trunks.

“We’re setting a good example” for the children of firefighters, said Moreno, referring to the lessons of giving without the thought of personal reward or recognition. “This is teaching them kindness and generosity and the spirit of giving.”

Ten-year-old Trevor Morse, son of firefighter-paramedic Chuck Morse and a fourth-grader at the Kairos Public School Vacaville Academy, collected toys this month from his classmates, after telling them about the toy drive.

If he could say anything to children around the world, he said it would be this: “To go home today after school, fill a bag with toys and donate them to a local fire station.”

The boy’s statement seemed to strike a chord with Moreno, who said, “It’s amazing how giving everybody is.” And, he added, the day’s activity allows people to see firefighters who “respond to the community in ways other than an emergency — that’s important for us.”

In previous interviews, Lynn Gallagher, food locker coordinator, said those served on Saturday — and once monthly throughout the year — were members of “the working poor,” many of them familiar faces over the life of the program, 31 years.

Don Krch, coordinator of the holiday food box program, said the dozen or so volunteers were equipped with a list of people and their children, if any, known to the parish and authorized to receive food. And “additional distribution” of several dozen boxes will happen later in the day, he said.

To qualify for the food, recipients must be Vacaville or Elmira residents and meet income guidelines as defined by federal regulations, say, a family of four living on less than \$24,000 per year (2012 Census Bureau data). Most of the food comes from the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano and donations from local residents, he noted.

Krch noted that the number of poor families seeking food assistance from the church has increased in recent months, climbing to more than 360 monthly, a fact that may strike some as unusual, coming as the U.S. economy continues to improve, with lower jobless rates and a bullish Wall Street.

“I’ve talked to other food lockers in town and their numbers are down,” he said.

Why St. Mary’s number are up remains a mystery, he said, but noted that, after St. Mary’s started adding fresh milk to the monthly boxes, the organization’s numbers rose by 40 families per month.

Besides frozen turkeys and all the ingredients for trimmings, Saturday’s boxes contained, among many other things, margarine, milk, a dozen eggs, cheese, rice, hot cocoa, kidney beans, almonds, bath soap, paper towels, and pie crusts.