

Share the Spirit: Families Receive Gifts from Caring Holiday Helpers

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Posted: 12/19/2012 11:34:32 AM PST

Updated: 12/20/2012 06:53:16 AM PST



Amy Kierce's family will be one of 450 families that will receive donations during two days of...

CONCORD -- With only a few days left until Christmas, Amy Kierce is busy helping others while others are busy helping her.

On Wednesday, the Concord mom who spent a few years caring for her beloved grandparents and other family members began a two-week job taking care of an elderly couple. The assignment is giving Kierce, 37, much-needed professional experience to start a new career as a caregiver. It's a vocation worlds away from her former job as an underwriting assistant at a mortgage company, from which she was laid off nearly two years ago during the real estate market crash.

But that opportunity wasn't the only reason why a grateful Kierce was quietly shedding tears while sitting in the living room of the small apartment she shares with her partner, Ever, and their two boys, Elijah, 10, and Ever, 6.

This year, Kierce's family was one of 450 receiving toys, clothing, books and more through the Holiday Helpers Warehouse, an annual event for low-income families with children organized by Volunteer Emergency Services Team in Action, or VESTIA, of Pleasant Hill. The third and last warehouse is being held today in Richmond.

"I think it's incredible, I really do," Kierce said about the program. "I want to believe that there are still people out there in society that want to help the less fortunate and do whatever it is they can. I think it's incredible that they're able to collect these donations and put together a program and help those of us (who) are struggling right now."

Formerly known as Adopt-a-Family, the three-day Holiday Helpers Warehouse event serves 20 to 25 families every hour, said Anne Struthers, VESTIA's volunteer program coordinator. "We have access to social workers who identify all children in need in Contra Costa County," she said.

After families are recommended to the program, social workers determine their needs and set up the half-hour appointments. Donations pour in from schools, churches and other community groups, and on the day of each event volunteers ("elves") as young as 12 fill bags with books, toys, family board games, warm clothing, gift cards, provisions from the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano and more for each family.

Kierce learned about Holiday Helpers through the Job Club, a state program that helps welfare recipients find work. Since being laid off at the beginning of 2011, she has been receiving unemployment benefits, including food stamps and other assistance, while looking for work and caring for her children. Ever, a Nicaraguan immigrant whom Kierce met 12 years ago at a mortgage company, was not eligible for unemployment benefits because he worked temporary jobs.

Despite the layoff, the family has done its best to survive. Kierce is grateful for the subsidized housing that allows their rent to fluctuate with their income, and she said her boys have even volunteered to pitch in and help cover expenses. Elijah, who earns about \$2 for walking a neighbor's dogs, offered to let his mom borrow his "paycheck"; 6-year-old Ever said his birthday money could be used to buy groceries.

Those are the kinds of gestures that arise spontaneously from the sons she describes as good-hearted, caring, compassionate and understanding.