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Making spirits brighter

Lighthouse program changes lives

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It can be difficult to explain to a child why Santa Claus didn't leave many presents under the tree.

A nonprofit organization is hoping to make those conversations unnecessary for families of roughly 2,000 youths as it launches its annual "Happy Holidays" program.

The program is run by the nonprofit Lighthouse Youth Services in collaboration with WCPO-TV (Channel 9).

It allows the public to donate toys, clothes or other gifts to youngsters and families in need.

Donations can be made through Dec. 15.

"All the clients we serve, they often have never received anything new before," said Andrea Dine-Pickett, development assistant for Lighthouse Youth Services.

"They're receiving hand-me-downs and shopping at thrift stores. This is a chance for them to get something brand new - just for them - a chance for something to make them feel valued and special. It just brightens up their holiday."

For the first time in the program's history, people can also shop online to purchase gifts from a wish list.

For example, \$10 will buy a child a "stay warm" package of a hat, gloves and a scarf, or \$50 can buy a board game, sports equipment, and arts and crafts supplies.

Lighthouse provides gifts for teenagers living in foster care, group homes and at the Youth Crisis Center, and older youth living independently in supervised apartments.

The holiday project helps people like Raeakaye Patterson, 21, of Forest Park, who has a 6-year-old son, Jadon.

Patterson was born in Hamilton and grew up in California.

She became a mother in her teens and came to Cincinnati to stay with relatives. She stayed in school, got a job and tried to make it work.

But things didn't go as planned.

"I thought family would be supportive. Instead they started ripping me off. I eventually ended up on the streets," said Patterson.

She made the tough decision to send her son back to California to stay with relatives until she could provide a stable home.

"One rainy day I found Lighthouse," she said.

The Lighthouse Youth Crisis Center placed Patterson in her Forest Park apartment and provided support as she pursued her educational goals. She earned a GED in 2006 and is now a certified nursing assistant working as a home health aide. She's enrolled in an LPN program that begins in the spring.

Patterson and her son are now reunited. But things are still tough, especially around the holidays.

One year, her home was broken into and the thieves stole her Christmas tree, along with many gifts for her son.

Lighthouse and Media Play, where Patterson worked at the time, replaced the tree and provided gifts of race cars, Ninja Turtles and other toys for Jadon. Patterson calls Lighthouse "a blessing."

"It's important for my son to have the things he needs and the things he wants," she said.

"As a child he doesn't understand. If he sees other kids with things, he's, like, awww."

Lighthouse serves roughly 1,400 children at any given time in various programs.

It usually provides gifts for about 2,000 children through the holiday program.

Additional Facts

How you can help

To donate or get more information about the Lighthouse Happy Holidays project and the online "Top 10 Wish List," visit www.lys.org or www.wcpc.com, or call Development Assistant Andrea Dine-Pickett at (513) 475-5674.
