Chapter Name
Junior Auxiliary of Clinton, MS

Submitted by Name and Email Address
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Address
P.O. Box 593
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Population Category
15,000 - 29,999

Name of Project
Angel Tree

Project Category
Outstanding Existing Project

Total Hours of Service Given by Members
195

Active Membership of Chapter
Number of Members Participating
21

Purpose of Project
Christmas gifts to children, but empowerment of parents with health, financial and tutoring education

Cost of Project
700.00

Number of Persons Served
104

Narrative
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Digital Photo
Angel-Tree-JA-of-Clinton.jpg
It’s a signature project for the Junior Auxiliary of Clinton, one that places Christmas gifts in the hands of children who otherwise might go without.

But after being a staple in the Clinton community for more than two decades, Angel Tree needed a makeover. Members of the Chapter realized that it’s not enough to supply presents from Santa to more than 100 children when their parents can’t ensure that special delivery.

It’s not enough to partner with the nonprofit Clinton Community Christian Corporation (4Cs) to identify children who would benefit based on their family’s income. It’s not enough to spend three months organizing the information, assessing each family’s needs and compiling the gift wishes of each child served, and assigning Chapter members to specific tasks.

It’s not enough to place festive wreaths in businesses and schools bearing angel ornaments with the names and ages of Angel Tree children, plus their special wishes. It’s not enough to burst with pride as members of the community year after year enthusiastically adopt the angels, purchasing gifts and returning them to each wreath’s host site. It’s not enough to spend hours upon hours collecting the gifts, sorting them, and doing extra shopping to ensure that wishes are met and that no one child in a family gets substantially more gifts than his siblings.

And, it’s not enough to hold a “Cookies with Santa” party for the children at the 4Cs two weeks before Christmas, entertaining them with arts and crafts and a visit from Santa and Mrs. Claus while the parents privately load up gifts. The event is a fun finale to the project, with Crown Club girls and JA members working one-on-one with the children and sending them home with gifts for their parents that they made by hand.
It was time to give the children’s parents and guardians a gift – one that, for many, had never before been received. It was time, JA Ex-Officio Jill Lay said, to make the project less of a give-way and more of a two-way street.

For the first time, the Chapter required parents and guardians – all low-income and some jobless – to attend at least one of three educational classes created by members in order to receive Angel Tree gifts. Parents could choose between family finance, children’s education, and health and wellness classes, each lasting several hours. The goal: give parents the tools to improve their life situation and that of their children.

In a society where you might expect pushback from such a requirement, it wouldn’t have been surprising if some parents had balked and passed up the gifts. None did.

“They loved it,” Lay said.

Lay, a veteran elementary school teacher, led the education classes, offering them more than once so that parents could work one into their schedule. “It became a roundtable discussion. Parents asked how the could help a struggling reader. I answered their questions, but other parents joined the discussion and said what had worked for them. Everyone benefited from the experiences of the group. They offered each other advice.”

The same held true for the finance and health/wellness classes. JA members fielded questions and offered solutions to parents of obese children, and they discussed budgeting and good spending choices. The husband of a JA member taught CPR as part of the health/wellness class, giving parents a skill that someday might save a life.

The Chapter’s $700 budget for Angel Tree was largely intact, thanks to the generosity of the community in adopting angels and the donation of helmets for
several bicycle wishes. So, Angel Tree project chair Jana Chao approached Laurie Lawson, executive director of the 4Cs, asking if more families needed help.

Lawson explained that down-and-out families knock on the 4Cs’ doors through closing time on Christmas Eve in hopes of donations – but this year, there was a special family in need of love and assistance, one that hadn’t even asked for aid.

It was a Clinton father who’d just undergone surgery, facing the loss of income because he couldn’t yet return to work. “He had just been granted custody of his four young children,” Chao said. “He was referred to the 4Cs by someone in the community, but he wasn’t seeking help, although he definitely had needs.

“We were able to adopt these four children and show them love in a very tangible way during a very difficult time in their lives.”

Next year, the Chapter will repeat the classes and especially grow that arm of Angel Tree in a community with struggling residents who thirst for such knowledge.

“This year, the project felt different,” Lay said. “We built relationships.”