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In-Kinders Jeff O'Donnell, Lindsey Willis, M.J. Madigan, Diana Asher, David Schwartz and Rhona Neuwirth.

JIM MACLEAN/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Gift squad steps up to save the day at CV

By Denise Woodin

From the outside, the one-story concrete-block building doesn't look much like Santa's workshop. And even the interior, crowded with haphazardly stacked corrugated boxes marked by their contents — girls' jeans, soft toys, uninflated basketballs, younger "girlie" toys and dolls — lacks the glitter and shine of a traditional Christmas display. But the holiday spirit is alive and well on The Children's Village campus in Dobbs Ferry thanks to a group of volunteers dubbed the "In-Kinders."

Working in their jackets — the building is unheated — less than a week before Christmas, the In-Kinders packed tote bags with gifts for the estimated 100 children who would not be returning home for the holidays. Founded in 1851 to help homeless immigrant children, The Children's Village (CV) currently houses approximately 300 children and teens, almost exclusively male, in 18 residential "cottages." All of the children have troubled pasts, coming to CV from broken or violent homes or through the juvenile justice system. For many, a happy holiday season is more a dream than a reality.

"It's a tough time of year for our kids," observed Candy Fitts, CV's director of volunteers and academic programs. "They all want to go home, whether it's safe or not."

Like many nonprofit organizations, CV went through a difficult period of budget cuts and downsizing earlier this year. As a result, the coordinator of the in-kind donations office was reassigned,

stranding the year-round program that funnels donated goods from corporations, schools, churches and individuals to children and families in need.

In an interview with the Enterprise, Linda Stutz, CV's vice president for institutional advancement, described the work involved in running an in-kind gifts program. Individuals donate clothing, books, TVs, and furniture. A major retailer sends regular shipments of housewares and bedding twice a month. And during the holiday season, groups ranging from fraternities to churches organize toy drives. Coordinating deliveries, taking inventory, sorting, and distributing the donations "doesn't happen by itself." The contributions benefit not only CV's resident and day population — in addition to the 300 who live on campus, another 100 students attend school onsite — but also 1,000 to 1,500 families who are served by CV programs in Westchester and Rockland counties and New York City.

To fill the vacuum, members of the organization's Community Advisory Committee (CAC) took over the program in September. Drawing in volunteers from other CV initiatives, the newly formed In-Kinders began taking inventory and reaching out to cottage supervisors to match donated items with need.

CAC chair David Schwartz, who has lived near CV and admired its work for more than 35 years, told the Enterprise "the CAC said 'no way' to cutting the program." The group of eight volunteers now arrives on campus every Wednesday, ready to roll

up their sleeves. "There was obviously a real need," remarked Hastings resident M.J. Madigan. And "it was something physical and doable."

Not long after taking charge, the In-Kinders learned that CV planned to scrap its "Santa Store." An annual holiday tradition, the Santa Store transformed the gymnasium into a magical emporium where the children and teens were given \$5 each to buy presents for their families at significantly marked-down prices. "It's a huge undertaking," Stutz noted. "Donations are coming in all day, every day. It was something that really resonated with the CAC. They really wanted to do the Santa Store. But it was just too much."

Diana Asher, who lives in Scarsdale and has helped with CV's Books for Boys program, said, "We were very sad about this because it's the one opportunity for the kids to give something to their families."

So this year, the In-Kinders are doing the next-best thing: putting together gift packages for each child's family. "These boys have had very difficult upbringings," commented Dobbs Ferry resident Jeff O'Donnell. "We just couldn't deal with the idea that the boys wouldn't have a great holiday."

O'Donnell, who has been a member of the CAC since its founding five years ago and also serves on the Dobbs Ferry School Board, added, "It's so nice that local businesses give back to Children's Village."

"And Mercy College, The Masters School, churches, and temples," Fitts jumped in, ticking off just a few of the pro-

gram's many supporters.

Even with the changes, the In-Kinders have their hands full this year. In addition to packages for the families, and tote bags filled with presents for the children who will remain on campus, each child will receive two "wish list" gifts that are provided by community donors, and each cottage will receive a large communal item such as a Wii system, flat screen television or ping-pong table. One of the challenges, Fitts noted, is making sure that the children who are admitted in the days before Christmas are not forgotten.

Last Monday, six In-Kinders — O'Donnell, Madigan, Schwartz, Asher, Hastings resident Rhona Neuwirth, and Dobbs Ferry resident Lindsey Willis — worked efficiently, packing dozens of cloth totes with sports jerseys, remote-controlled trucks, and the kind of toys most kids take for granted. Using requisition sheets from cottage supervisors and social workers that listed each child's interests and hobbies, the volunteers made each package personal. Holding up a page, Madigan announced, "We need donations of art supplies next year. So many kids have requested this." O'Donnell pulled on his gloves and grabbed a hand truck, leaving with Schwartz to find whatever art supply kits were left.

"They really seem to enjoy this," Stutz remarked. "I can just see the light in their eyes." A grateful Fitts concluded, "The In-Kinders really stepped up. They saved Christmas for us."