

Merrimack Valley YMCA Spreads Holiday Cheer to Hundreds of Local Families



This holiday season, hundreds of children and their families received toys, books, clothing and special holiday meals thanks to the generosity of so many in our community. For the first time the Merrimack Valley YMCA was able to provide special Christmas meals to many of our YMCA families, thanks to special contributions from board member Mary Lou Schaalman and the Cafua Management Company. Schaalman and her husband Donald have been very active volunteers for the Merrimack Valley YMCA for many years. They believe that no family should have to worry about food, especially on Christmas, and made a contribution which allowed the YMCA to provide clementines, bacon, eggs, pancakes and more for a festive Christmas morning breakfast.

The same sentiment drives the Methuen-based Cafua Management Company, the largest privately owned Dunkin' Donuts franchisee in the U.S., which truly believes that Christmas is a time to celebrate family, friends and faith. While the Christmas season can be an especially stressful time of year, especially for families that are struggling to make ends meet, they hope to spread some holiday cheer by providing a special meal so families can celebrate the season with a little less worry. Volunteers from the YMCA, with help from the staff at the North Andover Market Basket, loaded carts with ham, roasts, vegetables, fruit, rolls, pies and all the fixings needed for a festive holiday breakfast and dinner.

These special meals were delivered through the recently opened food pantry at the Lawrence YMCA. The pantry, which operates with support from Joy in Childhood Foundation as well grants from TJX Foundation, YMCA of the USA and the Walmart Foundation, allows the Merrimack Valley YMCA Food Program to better serve local families. Run by the YMCA's Executive Director of Childcare, Cathy Flynn, the Food Pantry and Teen Dinner Program has provided more than 92,000 meals, impacting more than 450 children and their families.

"The food pantry gives families the opportunity to come and shop with pride and dignity," said Flynn. "Having a refrigerator and freezer gives us the chance to offer a wider variety of healthy food including frozen chicken, turkey, fish, eggs, cheese, yogurt, fresh vegetables and more. We are so grateful to our donors and volunteers who are helping make the holidays brighter for our neighbors and helping us fulfil our mission of making healthier lives achievable for everyone."

Not only were our families able to celebrate the season with delicious meals, more than 400 children

received gifts of toys, books and clothing this holiday season. The magic of Christmas was in the air on a Saturday in early December, as 100 children from the Merrimack Valley YMCA had the chance to fulfill their holiday wish lists thanks to the Cafua Family Charitable Foundation's "\$100 for 100" program. More than 70 employees from Cafua Management Company volunteered their time to shop with the children and their caregivers at Target in Salem, NH. The children were told they could shop for themselves, or for anyone they wished, and were each presented with a \$100 Target gift card from the foundation.

The Cafua Family Charitable Foundation, the charitable arm of the Methuen-based Cafua Management Company, believes that all children deserve to have a happy Christmas. "The goal of our \$100 for 100 program is to spread holiday joy, especially to the youngest members of our communities, during this most special time of year," said Cafua Management Company CEO Mark Cafua.

"We truly value our partnership with the Merrimack Valley YMCA, as it has provided us with the opportunity to not only reach those most in need of Christmas cheer, but also to engage our employees in meaningful programs within their own communities."

In addition to the "\$100 for 100" event, employees of Allscripts in Burlington fulfilled the wish lists of more than 80 children this holiday season. A longtime supporter of the gift drive, they continue to enthusiastically support our efforts to spread holiday cheer each year. To round out our workshop, the Highland Street Foundation delivered boxes of toys, games, books and coats, parishioners at St. Michael Parish donated more than 125 gifts, and the Eta Omega Honor Society at UMASS-Lowell once again contributed generously to our drive. The Exchange Club of Lawrence, led by the efforts of Sharon Birchall, contributed \$500 to ensure that everyone was taken care of this holiday season. This generosity, as well as the generosity of many other members of the community, brings a tremendous amount of joy to hundreds of families each holiday season.

To learn more about the food program and how you can help, please visit www.mvymca.org/meals.