

'The People Who Still Care'

John Breunig, editorial page editor of The Advocate and Greenwich Time

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Jackie had to tell her kids not to expect any gifts on Christmas morning.

"Right now we are not doing well," she told me in the hours approaching Christmas Eve.

She's a single mom, her father is in the hospital and her full-time salary didn't leave enough to buy anything wrapped in a bow. She speaks of her circumstances in a clear, steady voice, not inviting anything as trivial as maudlin holiday sentiment. Dec. 25 is just a date on the calendar this year.

Jackie, 49, told her 12-year-old son she just couldn't afford any of the things on his wish list. Her 15-year-old daughter summoned the poise to respond "It's OK, I don't need anything."

She offered them hope of a delayed Christmas in a few months, after she gets her income tax refund. For now, she's not even putting up a tree.

Hers is not really a Christmas story. It's another reflection of stagnant wages. The United Way recently reported that 25 percent of the households in Connecticut don't earn enough to pay for basic needs, despite steady employment.

For the sixth year -- a period that dovetails with the economic downturn -- Domus Foundation, a non-profit agency in Stamford that helps vulnerable youth, has been holding a one-day Holiday Mall that invites parents in need to pick up a few gifts for their children. A wish list is compiled, requests from the more than 1,100 children in Domus' educational, residential and community programs. Gifts are collected from area businesses. Parents get three tickets for each child, and an hour to shop in a temporary mall at Domus' Lockwood Avenue site in Stamford that divides presents by age groups from birth to 18.

This year's mall served about 400 families and more than 1,000 children, according to Domus' Melissa Bramble, who coordinates the effort. For the first time, they also welcomed some neighbors who are outside the program.

"Right now we're seeing more people who are not able to meet basic needs," Bramble said Friday. "In the past they were able to make ends meet in terms of food and bills. Now, some of them can't even buy soap and groceries, let alone Christmas gifts.

"We've seen cases of three people sharing a bed, or not having a bed. There is a much higher level of need than in the past," she added.

While for-profit retailers analyze the shopping season, there is no debating the success of this mall. Annie, 33, who works full-time for a retailer in Stamford, praised the quality of the gifts she picked up for her 14-year-old daughter and two boys, 8 and 4. Her artistic daughter got a painting set, her Lego-obsessed 8-year-old was thrilled to add to his collection, and her 4-year-old spent all of Christmas day playing with his new truck.

"It was a good Christmas," Annie said Friday. "There were no complaints from my family."

Like other parents I spoke to, Annie also got smaller toys off a table of stocking stuffers, including a requested Rubik's Cube. Parents have the option of having gifts wrapped, or taking paper home with them. Organizers even replenish gifts throughout the day so there's plenty for everyone.

"They care," Annie said of the Domus staff. She paused before continuing, stressing how much she appreciates their efforts throughout the year. "You don't find a lot of people who care. But they care. They ask about the kids all the time. I love that about them. I would not want my kids to go anywhere else."

Another single mom, Kim, 31, summoned similar words to describe her experiences with Domus. "They help us raise our kids. They are the people who still care," she said.

Kim decided to let her 11-year-old son and 12-year-old daughter select their own presents, picking up gift cards at the Holiday Mall for Forever 21 and Walmart.

Organizers are also sensitive to the needs of families that count on school breakfast and lunch programs to feed their kids. As part of the event, they offer staples such as tuna, macaroni and cheese, and cereal to help during the 12-day break.

I called Jackie back on Friday to see how the holiday went. She visited her dad in the hospital on Christmas. Her son got a football she picked up at the Holiday Mall, along with blankets, slippers and jackets she selected for both kids. She joked that the headphones she gave her daughter were "a gift for me."

Jackie calls the Holiday Mall a "beautiful experience." Still, her real gift may have been the response she got from her daughter when she broke the news that Christmas would have to wait for tax season.

"You make Christmas for us every day, so we can wait," her daughter replied.

John Breunig is editorial page editor of The Advocate and Greenwich Time. He can be reached at john.breunig@scni.com; 203-964-2281; <http://twitter.com/johnbreunig>.