

E-mail sparks Christmas miracle at Skip-A-Long

By Jonathan Turner,
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MOLINE – Christmas will be brighter for many families at Skip-A-Long Child Development Center, thanks to donations of groceries, toys and clothes from area businesses and individuals.

"It's just phenomenal the community outreach," Angie Kendall, Skip-A-Long's family service provider, said Wednesday. "I just moved here a year and a half ago, and I'm amazed at the support, the love they've shown. My phone has been ringing off the hook."

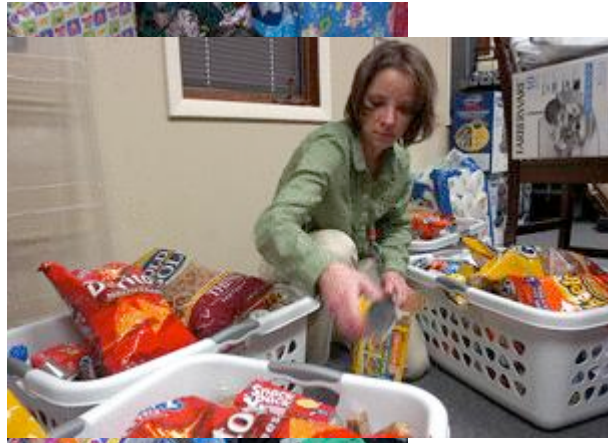
Given the economy and hard times experienced by many of the center's families, Ms. Kendall wrote a heartfelt e-mail to her husband, Aaron, at Russell Construction last week asking for help.

"I was frustrated about how defeated I felt my families seemed," she said.

That one e-mail "has now snowballed as he passed it and that person passed it, until now bags of food and gifts of toys are rolling into her office faster than she can keep up," Skip-A-Long CEO Laurel Walker said of Ms. Kendall. "Companies have decided to forgo their holiday party and donate to this instead.

"The stories are just amazing," Ms. Walker said. "This little e-mail has generated unbelievable Christmas spirit and will make so many families smile this year."

There are 228 children enrolled at the center, 4800 60th St., with 85 percent of the families on a sliding fee scale or state assistance, Ms. Kendall said.



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Photo: Paul Colletti

Sarah Perkins spends her Wednesday afternoon at Skip-A-Long Child Development Center in Moline sorting donated groceries to be given to local families. Ms. Perkins is with Russell Construction who bought the food, adding to the holiday toy donations that Skip-A-Long already received.

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Photo: Paul Colletti

Angie Kendall has little room to move since toys donated for local families have taken up residence in her office at the Skip-A-Long Child Development Center in Moline. The center has received an outpouring of food and toy donations for local families this holiday season.



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Julie Allen has her arms full as she helps sort groceries at Skip-A-Long Child Development Center in Moline on Wednesday afternoon, December 17. Ms. Allen is the Moline campus director and pitched in to get the items donated by Russell Construction ready for the families to use.

"They're having to choose whether to pay early child care or paying their bills," she said. "They're opting to have children stay home with aunts and uncles; the economy is so down."

Many families work in the service industry, Ms. Kendall said. "Restaurants are slow, they can't afford it, so they're cutting hours, losing their benefits," she added. "There are a lot of layoffs."

One family recently moved to America and speaks little English, she said. The mother makes little money working at a restaurant, with her hours recently cut. The father doesn't make enough to both raise his family and send some money to family members overseas.

Their state co-pay is high, Ms. Kendall said, but they said they would find the money to ensure their girls had every opportunity to learn English. The mother's entire paycheck is sent to Skip-A-Long to cover her co-pay.

Russell Construction canceled its holiday party this year and donated \$2,000 to the families for groceries and gifts. Mr. Kendall and a Russell colleague, Sarah Perkins, spent more than four hours shopping Wednesday and delivered the items to Skip-a-Long.

"It feels good to give back," said Ms. Perkins, a mother of 4- and 1-year-old girls.

"I grew up with a single mom, and I knew what she went through on a daily basis," she said. "I'm fortunate. My girls are spoiled rotten."

The response at Russell was "just amazing," Ms. Perkins said.

"It's incredible the donations people were dropping off at our office to make a child smile," she said. "I can't imagine my children waking up and not having Santa be there for them."

Ms. Kendall asked families what they needed so appropriate gifts could be bought. Very few mothers said they need anything for themselves, she said.

Parents' responses have ranged from, "I can't believe someone would do this" to "We planned on not having Christmas at all," according to Ms. Kendall

"The shock and delight on their faces is phenomenal. It's crazy," she said.

She said she wanted to provide more, in part, because the Angel Tree gift program has not been as successful this year. About 80 children signed up for tree will be among those getting the donations.

Ms. Kendall said she was contacted by The Salvation Army (which runs the program) prior to her e-mail and was told the Angel Tree was slower this year.

"So I was getting nervous as I had many more families enrolled who didn't get a chance to sign up for Angel Tree, and others who thought they didn't need assistance but had lost their jobs in the meantime and do need assistance now," she said.

"I just know that I saw families struggling more and more in the economy each day," Ms. Kendall said. "I just really want the community to know that we appreciate their support with Angel Tree as well."

She noted that many local companies, nonprofits and individuals have joined Russell in making donations.

"I didn't do any of this; the community did," Ms. Kendall said. "This has just made my Christmas. This support alone has been my Christmas gift."

The Little E-mail That Could "I was thinking about all of our families who are in need this Christmas, and boy do I have a list that keeps growing! I keep getting requests for food baskets, and I don't know that we will have enough donations here to fill them all"

"To make things worse, I also got an e-mail that the Angel Tree drive has been quite depressing this year; leaving maybe one toy per child. Do you know of any people at work who would like to sponsor a family?"

"Also, anybody who has new or lightly used clothing that their children have outgrown, we are in desperate need of clothes for our kids. Many have outgrown last year's clothes, and parents can't find winter clothes. It seems my phone and office have been almost a constant stream of calls about layoffs and calls about needing food, money for utilities, clothing, boots, coats, etc."

"People keep dropping (from the center) because they can't even afford their \$10 co-pays now, and everyone seems to be losing their jobs; full-time hours have been cut to part-time to avoid paying benefits. I am really starting to get down about all that is happening right now and the looks on my clients' faces of defeat."

-- E-mail sent by Angie Kendall to her husband, Aaron, noting the needs of Skip-A-Long families. Her note was repeatedly forwarded, leading to several generous donations.