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EVENT PRESS RELEASE

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Photos: Courtesy of Community Outreach Ministry

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Hundreds of Youth Celebrate the Holidays Courtesy of a Christmas Drive-Thru

By Lynn K. Loyd

Hundreds of at-risk youth from Southwest Riverside County enjoyed another unique holiday experience in December when local county, church, and businesses pitched in to set up a Christmas Drive-Thru in Wildomar. In lieu of the traditional holiday party sponsored each year by the Community Outreach Ministry, a nonprofit organization focused on assisting youth who have one or both parents in prison, approximately 200 children were invited to the drive-thru event. An additional drive-thru was held on December 16 for those unable to attend the December 11 event due to inclement weather.

Children of all ages received food, clothing and gifts courtesy of Community Outreach Ministry that has served at-risk youth for more than 20 years. The Ministry -- led by Dr. Mona Salomo-Davies and her husband Bob or “STEM Coach Bob” as he is known by youth for his mentoring activities -- collaborates each year with Angel Tree a Program® of Prison Fellowship to host what is called the Angel Tree Christmas party for children who cannot celebrate the holidays with one or both parents because the parent(s) are incarcerated. The drive-thru was held on December 11 with assistance from Larry Ryan, trustee at the Wildomar Elks Lodge #2591, and The Habit Burger Grill Catering Truck.

Assistant Angel Tree coordinators Janice Hare, Johnna Hose, along with Yolanda Burgess, Patti and Elijah O’Leary, Summer and Clarissa Fears, Marilyn Brown and Family, and Briana Ramirez, distributed holiday meals, gifts, and assorted items to those in attendance. Founded in 1976, the Prison Fellowship program began offering at-risk youth Christmas gifts in 1982 and, to date, has given gifts to more than 11 million “angels;” children who have one or both parents who are incarcerated. The nonprofit organization is a Christian-based group that considers itself to be a leading advocate for justice reform. Prison Fellowship also provides services for prisoners and former prisoners, according to its website: www.prisonfellowship.org.

Together with Community Outreach Ministry, the two organizations have worked tirelessly to help these at-risk youth avoid their parents' fate. In addition to annual holiday parties, each group offers a host of activities and services for both children and adults; activities that include career guidance, mentoring, camping trips and STEM workshops. This year's annual holiday festivities included a second drive-thru hosted by The Mill Pizza Restaurant sponsored by Dr. Michael and Karan Andersen of Cornerstone Women’s HealthCare of Murrieta. Children received complimentary meal cards donated by Dr. Andersen. The meal cards were included in swag bags that were provided by Kathryn Ross who made Christmas ornaments for each child. Ross, along with her husband Gary,

created lil' Gary's Legacy; a Christian Resource Center in memory of their son, Gary, who committed suicide in 2002 and their daughter, Tiffany, who died ten years later according to the website <https://lilgaryslegacy.org/>.

Elijah O'Leary, one of the many volunteers commented on why he chose to get involved with the festivities by stating that, as a 16-year-old from Hemet, he personally benefitted in the past from the Angel Tree Christmas parties. O'Leary lives with Patti O'Leary, his great aunt because his mother is in prison. "Since I was little, I became an Angel Tree recipient of Christmas gifts from my incarcerated mother," O'Leary said. "I have not seen or heard from my mom since I was three so getting those gifts was important...My mother has been in and out of prison for years because of drugs. I emailed Community Outreach Ministry in 2020 because I wanted to help other Angel Tree children 'feel like I did' when gifts arrived at Christmas from my mom. For a few years, those gifts were all I received, so it was nice. When I am around other Angel Tree kids, I feel like we all understand each other, and I am not embarrassed. The gifts make me feel like I can really be somebody. "That feels good because I do not hear that very often," O'Leary said. "So, what you are doing is special and it means a lot to kids like me...A lot of people look down at us, so I tried to be nice because people [from the nonprofit organizations] have been nice to me and that helps kids like us a lot."

Two years ago, Dr. Salomo-Davies recommended O'Leary for the Give Something Back Foundation in San Bernardino. The mission of the foundation is to mentor youth facing hardships and provide them with scholarships. In October, O'Leary was recognized by Give Back as one of three scholars awarded for his 4.02 GPA academic achievement.

Community Outreach Ministry was thankful for the support they received from Riverside County Board of Supervisors Kevin Jeffries District 1 and Chuck Washington District 3, Lake Elsinore Sheriff Station, Crosspoint Church of Temecula, and to the many community gift

sponsors: Wells Fargo Lake Elsinore, Southland Arthritis Rheumatology Menifee, Cathie and Bob Smith, Emily Stitt, Denise Ronzello and the many clients at Shear Expressions Hair Salon in Murrieta. Additional sponsors were Yolanda Burgess Bookkeeping, Massage Envy, Denise Gregory - Fitness 19, Chick-fil-A, Anthony's Lounge & Ristorante, and Jeff M. Prais, D.D.S. This year's newest gift sponsors were the following: Culture Works HR, Tyler & Bursch, LLP, Advocates for Faith & Freedom, All From the Heart, Valerie A. Scola, D.D.S., Murrieta Wildomar Chamber of Commerce, and Menifee Santa's Workshop. Click to watch video

<https://vimeo.com/787005908>

Community Outreach Ministry welcomes partners and sponsors to help support scholarships for at-risk kids to engage in year-round mentor-protégé workshops in Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics. To donate, text "DONATE CHAMPIONS" to 609-212-0627. Readers can also donate online at www.communityoutreachministry.org. Mail checks to Community Outreach Ministry, 23905 Clinton Keith Road Suite 114 #116, Wildomar, California 92595. For more information, contact the ministry at 951-698-7650 or email the organization at info@communityoutreachministry.org.