

Spotlight on The Angel Trees



Our church is adorned with Christmas trees this season. In the sanctuary, in the narthex, outside the choir room, and by the Chapel, green trees stand with their own stories and purposes. Two of these trees are designated as Angel Trees – well-known Crestwood fixtures for many Christmas seasons.

I was surprised how long the Angel Tree program has existed at Crestwood. Tracing it back to its beginnings will take another Spotlight article, but with help from past coordinators, they are pretty sure the program was in place at least since 1993 and probably earlier.

The basic idea of the Angel Tree is that area elementary schools come up with names of children whose parents need a special boost in providing presents at Christmas time. Each angel on the tree represents a child, and lists their gender, their age, their sizes, and most importantly, the items they most want for Christmas. This year we were encouraged to adopt family groups in order to ensure equality of presents among siblings. Parishioners choose an angel, go shopping, return the gifts, and all is happy for the holidays. Only, when one looks closely, it's way more complicated than that.

Here is how it unwinds: This year Crestwood paired up with three elementary schools – Glendover, Russell Cave, and Liberty – to provide Christmas for 181 children. The children and their needs are identified by the Family Resource Center coordinators at each school. Those coordinators talk with the parents and children and provide Crestwood with a spreadsheet with ages, sizes, and Christmas desires.

As the time approached for the information to arrive, our Crestwood children drew pictures of angels. Some of the kiddos this year also drew animal angels because, they said, "God loves animals too."

Next, our office manager Jennifer Heersche took over and did technological magic involving merging of databases and spreadsheets from the schools into other programs – things incomprehensible to me. The personal identifications were removed, and copies of our children's angels and the desired gift information were printed onto each side of heavy paper that could be hung on the tree. The angels were color-coded by school. There seemed to be no room for error.

Our children helped attach ribbons to the angels and hang them on the correct tree. Michelle DeLacey helped them finish the complicated task. Spreadsheets for check-out, directions, and a big bag for the gifts were assembled. As each parishioner chose an angel or angels, they were to check out on the color-coded sheets – but of course, there were people like me busy talking who first wrote their names in the wrong places, scratched out and tried again, messing up the organized system. I didn't make things easier for anyone!

In a couple of weeks, all the angels were gone and the big black plastic bags, now full of toys and clothes, started returning to the church. Our volunteer elves had to drag all the heavy bags from the trees to the administration wing to the rooms assigned to the various schools. Those of us pushing the deadline returned ours directly to the designated rooms. As the deadline to return gifts approached, Heidi Guckenberger came to the church and helped Missy check and recheck received presents against the list of angels adopted.

At the end it was a bit tight with a significant number of angels unaccounted for only several days from the deadline. But phone calls remedied that. I was told that sometimes people donate money or get ill before they can shop, so our volunteers or staff make trips to the store to buy the needed items. They're going to revisit the schedule for next year, but all packages were accounted for in time!

Next, the schools were scheduled at separate times to come get their gifts. It was a large commitment on the part of the schools – one year reportedly there was a long caravan of volunteer cars – but this year they borrowed vans and trucks and arrived with strong helpers which took care of the job for each school.

The majority of our presents – 100 of them – went to Russell Cave where there is the most need. Other churches will be jumping in to fill in rest of the needs there, explained Heidi Guckenberger, who was our official contact with Russell Cave. Megan Bacon handled Glendover, and Missy Wallace dealt with

Liberty. It is kind of fun to think of the bustle at the schools now as it is their turn again to deal with the complex system and skillfully manage to get the right presents to the right families. The caring rolls on.

After the trees were emptied of their angels at Crestwood, a collection of hats, scarves, and gloves started covering one of the trees, thanks to our generous congregation again. Those items collected will go to Liberty this year. On the same tree there are small ornaments sent to us as "thank yous," made by an art class at Glendover.

What a complex undertaking! Our Head Helper Elf, Children's Minister Missy Wallace, cannot be praised enough – the whole project has her fingerprints on it. But she turns aside to give all credit to church members who also put in many hours of work to make the Angel Tree happen. It is always a fear of the Spotlight that I have left out names of important helpers, but our church thanks all the unnamed volunteers over the years who give us the opportunity to spread love and happiness at this joy-filled season. As well as helping the children, they have helped us reflect on our own good fortune and to keep our priorities in balance as we remember others less fortunate.

Let's explore Crestwood together. If you have an idea or suggestion for a Spotlight, contact Gaye Holman at gHolman@bellsouth.net.



Crestwood Christian Church | 1882 Bellefonte Dr. | Lexington, KY 40503 US

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