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## Toy Donations to LINK Aid 470 Families

By Erin E. Fogg   
Observer Staff Writer

Inside a back room at Herndon United Methodist Church a hot pink bicycle leaned against its kick stand, patiently waiting for a new owner to come along.

Volunteers weaved in and out of the room, rushing boxes out the door and down the crowded hallway to the check-out table. The LINK toy distribution event was in full swing with a line beginning to extend out the church entrance and down Bennett Street. More than 470 families would pass through the building by the end of the day, picking up two gifts for each of the 1,500 children on the LINK list.

Placing the bicycle out among the tables full of Barbie dolls and basketballs might have caused a commotion. After all, a bicycle is the ultimate Christmas gift. Volunteers left it hidden in the back room, unsure what exactly to do with it.

A couple hours passed before one volunteer, a teacher at a local school, ran into one of her students walking by the tables of toys with her mother. The volunteer asked the 10-year-old girl, "If you could have anything you wanted for Christmas, what would it be?" The woman's heart fell when the girl replied "a bicycle." She had no idea that a successful toy drive at the Loudoun Easterner newspaper had yielded truckloads of great gifts for LINK clients to choose from, among them a bicycle.

Another volunteer happened to overhear the conversation. She led teacher, student, and mother through the crowd and into the back room. Volunteers bustling through the room stopped. Friendly chatter came to a halt. Everyone watched silently as the wide-eyed little girl walked toward the bicycle and her mother burst into tears.

### *The Recipients*

"That is why everyone does this," said Lisa Fagan, a volunteer at the LINK event.

In her third year volunteering at the toy distribution, Fagan said long

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lines, the sheer volume of people in need, and a limited supply of toys can make some recipients appear less than grateful.

"But you always get that one person who you know you just made their day," she said. The little girl who received the bicycle was "still glowing" Saturday evening when a volunteer dropped off the large gift at her house.

Fagan said parents are just as excited as the children. Despite waiting for more than an hour to be checked in and "shop" for toys for her children, one mother finished the check-out process and asked a volunteer if she could help out.

"She went out to her car to drop off her toys, then came back in and volunteered for a few hours," Fagan said.

Carol Lavery, vice president of LINK, said Saturday's turnout of recipients far exceeded last Christmas season. "We served 300 families last year," she said. "This year we had 470."

More than 50 of those families were "walk-ins" who were not signed up through LINK, but no one was turned away, Lavery said. The tables began looking a little skimpy earlier than expected, but families were able to get toys all the way up to the final minute. Nothing was left over.

"We used every single toy," Lavery said.

Fagan said last year LINK had toys left over and the year before they ran out of toys. While all local families who stopped by the event on Saturday were able to pick out toys for their children, the volunteers are already brainstorming how to get more toy donations for next year.

### *The Volunteers*

LINK is an all-volunteer organization comprised of 14 churches of various affiliations in the Herndon, Sterling and Ashburn communities. Since 1972, the churches have been providing food and financial assistance to local residents throughout the year. Every Thanksgiving, LINK volunteers hold large food and coat distribution events. The week before Christmas, volunteers host food and toy distributions, one held at Christ the Redeemer Church in Sterling and the other at Herndon United Methodist Church.

More than 3,000 toys went home to local families at this year's event, thanks to the efforts of many churches, school groups, organizations and donors .

Christian Fellowship Church in Ashburn donated 760 age- and gender-appropriate "Love Boxes" filled with small toys and personal care items to the LINK event on Saturday. The Family Christian Bookstores donated more than 300 stuffed teddy bears. The Loudoun Easterner newspaper, St. Joseph's CCD classes, Floris Elementary School, Herndon United Methodist preschool, and the Community Lutheran

Church in Sterling all played major roles in collecting toy donations from the public.

Fagan said volunteers from senior citizens to young children showed up at the church on Saturday to help in many facets of the event. Volunteers were restocking tables with toys, translating for Spanish-speakers, helping clients look for particular items, gathering "Love Boxes," or carrying bags out to cars. Many volunteers spent hours prior to the event sorting toys and setting up.

But as soon as volunteers began arriving at Herndon United Methodist at about 7:15 a.m., people were already lining up outside the door, prepared to wait until the 9 a.m. start time, Fagan said. As crucial as volunteers are to the process, she said, the need for more donations is simply overwhelming.

### *The Need*

More toys, as well as a better balance of the type of toys, are necessary to meet the increasing needs in the community.

Lavery said donors usually think giving several smaller toys is better than one or two larger toys. Gifts for older children are often left out of the mix as well. "Everybody thinks about the little kids," she said. "People forget about the 9- and 12-year-olds and the teenagers."

Fagan said gifts such as CD players and inline skates are typically on sale throughout the year and donating them to a toy drive will make a major difference to an older child whose family cannot afford such presents.

"These kids are just like your kids," she said. "They want to walk downstairs at Christmas and see something special. Give something that you would give to your own child."

Since LINK is an all-volunteer, nonprofit organization, there are no full-time staff members working year round to build on the current number of donations. Volunteers are hoping to expand efforts to enlist the support of local businesses to gather more and more toys for next year's distribution.

Fagan said one moment at Saturday's event in particular convinced her the community was more in need than she realized.

Toward the end of the day, people were limited to choosing one toy for each child. Fagan watched as one woman told her daughter she must leave behind either the toy or the mittens she had picked out.

"The little girl chose the mittens over the toy," Fagan said. "That's when I say we need more toys. And more mittens."

Low-income families in the Herndon area need help throughout the year, but especially during the holiday season. While she has never been in as serious financial difficulties as most of LINK's recipients,

Fagan said she believes strongly in the effect of the annual toy drive. Volunteering each year and watching families go home with toys for their children that they would not have been able buy themselves has truly made her own Christmases more meaningful.

"You can't fix their problems, you can't make everything better," Fagan said. "But you can give them a Christmas."

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