



Foster families celebrate the holidays at annual event

By Emily Mavrakis / Correspondent

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At the 22nd annual Christmas for the Community holiday celebration Sunday about 150 local foster children ate a Christmas lunch, met UF athletes and posed for photos with a therapy horse. Santa Claus also made an appearance and provided presents for each of the children.

Christmas came early for Alachua County's foster children and their families.

The Partnership for Strong Families and the University City Church of Christ in Gainesville collaborated for its 22nd annual Christmas for the Community event on Sunday. At the holiday celebration, about 150 local foster children ate a Christmas lunch, met University of Florida athletes and posed for photos with a therapy horse. Santa Claus also made an appearance and provided presents for each of the children.

"It's something I think people look forward to every year," said Patty Carroll, Strong Families' director of community relations and recruitment.

The Partnership for Strong Families is the leading child welfare services agency in North Central Florida, working in 13 counties. It provides resources and support for abused and neglected children as well as preventative services.

Event organizer Donny Dillon said Christmas in the Community uniquely allows all the foster children from the area to interact with one another during a special time of the year.

"For a lot of these foster kids, this is their only Christmas," he said.

Dillon said the event is a great way to make sure everyone has the opportunity to celebrate the holiday season with loved ones.

He also said Christmas for the Community is a joint effort that could not happen without support from community members. Church and community members, including UF students, always attend to help serve food and hand out gifts. Kitchen staff arrived at 8 a.m. to prepare an assortment of meat, vegetables, rolls and desserts for lunch.

The Florida Gators men's basketball team also met with the children and autographed posters.

Kevarrius Hayes, who plays center, said he enjoys seeing the smiles on children's faces when the team visits events like this.

"I feel like it's important to give back," he said.

Beverly and Allen Pope, of Lake City, attended the event with their newly adopted sons: 12-year-old Brandyn, his 9-year-old brother Aiden and Jeffrey, 11.

The Popes, who have four of their own adult children, said they joined the foster parent system as a way to give back to the community. Beverly Pope said she missed having children around as an empty nester.

They never intended to adopt, but their bonds with Brandyn, Aiden and Jeffrey became strong.

"We fostered for a while, and intended to foster as many as possible," Beverly Pope said.

After spending several years with them, the Popes formally adopted Brandyn and Aiden this past August and Jeffrey on November 14, National Adoption Day.

Beverly Pope said families who are interested in fostering should put aside their doubts and consider doing it. She remembers hearing a child share his story at an informational session, asking that foster parents "take a chance on me."

"Don't be afraid and give it a try" she said.

This holiday season won't be the family's first together, but it will be their first spent as official members of the Pope family.

"We always considered them part of our family," Beverly Pope said. "But now it's real. I'm excited to see what that looks like."