



## Foster kids shown love, normalcy at holiday event

By Chris Baldwin Staff writer

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Seventeen-year-old Grace has been in foster care for the past five years, moving from one foster parent to another for the first three years.

Grace said she remembers her first Christmas in foster care and how difficult of a transition it was.

But she also remembers attending her first Christmas for the Community event, an annual Christmas lunch for area foster children and families that was held Sunday afternoon at the University City Church of Christ Family Life Center in cooperation with Partnership for Strong Families, a regional nonprofit that supplies child welfare services.

During that event five years ago, Grace got the chance to see her siblings, who had been placed in separate foster homes, which she said made things a little easier.

The event offered her a tradition to look forward to as well as an opportunity to meet other foster children and families.

"I know they've been through some of the same stuff that I've been through and we can connect on that and build relationships," she said.

Donny Dillon, campus minister at the church who also led the opening prayer, said the event was first held in 1997 and served about 30 foster children. Four years later, the event was opened up to all foster children in the county.

Volunteers included about 70 University of Florida students, including basketball and equestrian team members as well as members of Gators for Christ, the church's UF ministry. Other volunteers were made up of church members.

To kick off the event, an entertainer came around to the tables and made balloon animals, to the children's delight.

The meal consisted of ham or turkey, sweet potato casserole, macaroni and cheese, mixed vegetables, dinner rolls, and fruit, which were served with seconds offered. Desserts, such as cookies and cupcakes, also were available.

Volunteers said the leftover food would go home with the some of the families.

Magic the Hero Horse, a miniature horse supplied by Gentle Carousel Miniature Therapy Horses, who is famous for being on hand after such tragic events as the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, the funerals for the victims of the Charleston church shooting, and other similar tragedies, stood for pictures with children.

But, it was the arrival of the Gator basketball team that drew a long line of wide-eyed children and volunteers as the players sat around an L-shaped table to sign autographs on team roster posters.

As people were still standing in line to receive their autographs, it was time for Santa to arrive. An a capella choir took to the front of the room to lead in the singing of "Joy to the World" and "Here Comes Santa Claus" in order to offer Kris Kringle a proper reception.

The children were then split into age groups in order to receive their presents, which Dillon said they were free to open right way.

Dillon said that about 180 gifts, each valued at \$20 or less, were donated for the event.

Stephen Pennypacker, president and CEO of Partnership for Strong Families, said that while during some weeks no children will be removed from their homes, other weeks may see as many as 10-12 children removed. And while the attempt is made to place children with relatives or known non-relatives, it is sometimes simply not possible.

For those children, Pennypacker said, events like Sunday's lunch are important, especially during the holidays.

"Older kids who may have become used to a routine in their homes are now no longer able to," he said. "Our job is to try to normalize that as much as possible."

Patty Carroll, director of community relations and recruitment for the partnership, said that the idea of normalcy or providing the experiences most children would typically receive is a focus of the event.

She also pointed out that the event is just as important for the foster parents.

"It's important for foster parents to come together, meet other foster parents and to also just feel connected," she said. "To feel like they have a community that does support them and to have a place to turn to later on when things might get a little difficult."

Carroll said there has been a shortage of foster parents in the area for a couple years now and there are slightly more than 100 foster parents covering 13 counties throughout the region, while there are 800 children in out-of-home care.

Those interested in learning more about fostering children or providing respite care for foster parents are urged to call 352-244-1500 or visit [www.partnerfamily.org](http://www.partnerfamily.org).

Amanda Williams, a social worker who, along with her wife, Deena, fosters Grace as well as three other children, said the event becomes a holiday tradition for her foster children.

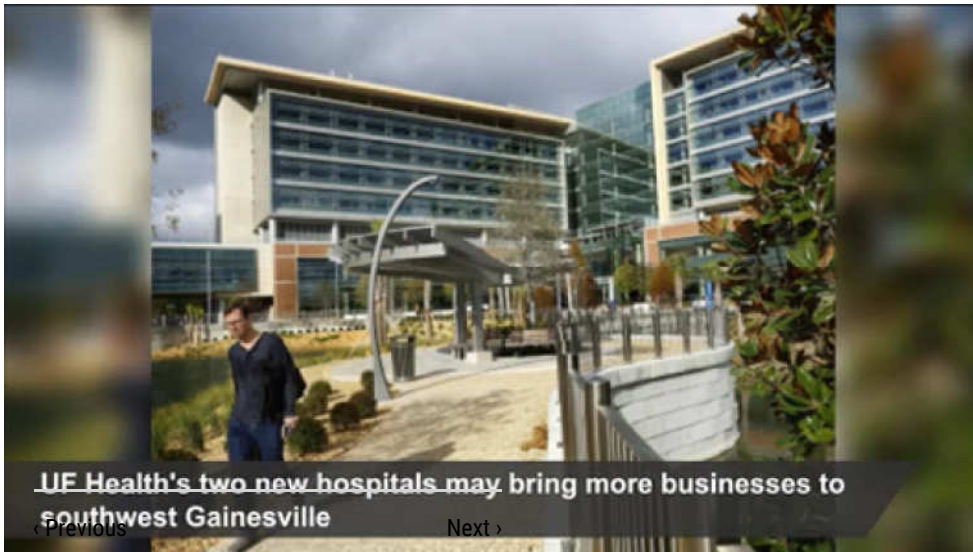
“Coming into care when you’re feeling so displaced, none of the traditions are the same,” she said. “So it becomes something that is so special to them that it’s part of their new family tradition.”



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