

## NEWS

# Drive-thru held for annual foster holiday event

**[Emily Mavrakis](#)** The Gainesville Sun

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Allie Cockrell, handing holiday gifts to foster families as they drove through the University City Church of Christ parking lot Sunday, said she understood just how important the act meant for foster children.

Cockrell, a 19-year-old Santa Fe College student, grew up in foster care before her forever family adopted her.

“We had something like this when I was growing up,” she said. “Some of the families can’t afford a ton of presents every year, especially right now with the pandemic, and being out here shows that older kids in the community care.”

Cockrell joined a handful of other volunteers outside the church for a pandemic-version of the annual Christmas for the Community holiday event, during which the church partners with the Partnership for Strong Families to provide gifts for about 150 local foster children.

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.

2020 was the 24th year for the holiday event, which is usually hosted inside the church’s family center and consists of a buffet lunch, autographs from University of Florida athletes and a surprise visit from Santa, before gifts are handed out.

Of course, this year the normal event wouldn’t be possible, said event organizer Donny Dillon.

“I think the biggest thing this year was that we wanted to still do something,” he said.

Dillon said volunteers from UF had the idea to host a parade to hand out gifts drive-thru-style, and a masked-Santa still greeted families in their vehicles as they exited.

Most of the presents were donated by members of the church, starting back in October, Dillon said.

Toys are collected for different age groups, from 1- to 3-year-olds, 4- to 7-year-olds, 8- to 11-year-olds and those 12 and older.

Any gifts that weren't picked up Sunday were gathered up to drop off at the Partnership on Monday for distributions to families that couldn't make it out to the parade.

Autumn Fuchs, 27, said she'd been volunteering at the event for several years, and that it's important to her that people do their part to give back during the holidays.

"It doesn't take much to come out here and donate a few hours of your time," said the SF College student.

"For a lot of people, Christmas is a luxury and this is the only gift these kids will get this year. Every little bit helps, and it adds up over time."