It Takes a Village
Volunteers and Staff Work Together
Annual Toy Sale

The 32th Annual Christmas Store was held on December 16 and 17th at St. Francis of Assisi’s Parish Hall. The event served over 340 families. HCC volunteers, the Notre Dame Club, Sin Fronteras Youth, staff and HCC board members joined to make this a wonderful event. These groups also helped raise dollars since traditional toy donations were down; the money raised was used to purchase additional toys. The event gave the families the opportunity to purchase new toys, bikes, and books at a reduced price for their children and family members.

This year ninety-six bikes were bought or donated as well as skateboards, scooters, and other toys over 2,000 toys amounting in value to over $70,000. We are very grateful to the over 60 volunteers that helped sort, price, setup, staff the tables and cleanup. Over 132 groups, individuals and organizations contributed to the Christmas Store. (see more page 2)
Nilka Melendez has improved the lives of so many at the Hope CommUnity Center, but the director of youth services says she’s been the one whose life has been turned around through those experiences.

“This place has changed my life,” said Melendez. “I have an opportunity everyday to empower people, but as I see their struggles, it has simplified my life and taught me that when you serve others you go to bed happy.”

The 55-year-old grew up in Puerto Rico and decided to be an Americorps volunteer while visiting a friend in Orlando. She quit her job, left her home and family and took a position that paid little and gave no guarantee of a future. She said her friends thought she was crazy, but it turned out to be the best decision of her life.

Melendez worked as an Americorps volunteer at the community center in 2005. Then she was offered a job as a mentor at Apopka High School, where she started an after-school tutoring program. She returned to Hope CommUnity Center working part-time with families at parenting classes then landed the full-time position as Youth Director.

She can be found at the center at nights and weekdays counseling youth, working with the poor and creating change through social justice. Melendez leads Sin Fronteras, the youth group that has grown to include more than 100 members. The youth take charge of the Summer Kids Camp where they create crafts and teach health, exercise and dance classes. The youth group also sponsors the Toy Sale at Christmas and the traditional Posada each year.

Melendez helped start the Mom’s Class, which teaches English to mothers, many who never had the opportunity to attend school. The class started with five women and has grown to include 20 moms who not only learn a new language but also are given the skills to become stronger women.

“This is not a job but a mission,” said Melendez. “I am a woman of faith and see God in everything I do here.”

They came with dollar bills stashed in their pockets to buy games covered in cellophane wrap and brown-faced baby dolls. 340 people who shopped at the 32nd Annual Christmas Store this year sang along with members of Sin Fronteras their rendition of Feliz Navidad.

The party atmosphere in the St. Francis Parish Hall during a balmy December weekend came with thanks for the blessings the annual toy store brings to the community. Sister Gail Grimes says the idea began in 1980 after the nuns kept finding Christmas gifts in their cars that people left to give local farmworkers. The store was founded on the principle that shoppers wanted to pick out presents for their children while maintaining the dignity of paying for the gifts themselves.

“These are the working poor who don’t always have money left for extras,” said Sister Gail.

The shop has had ten locations during the years including a funeral home, a community center, the farmworker office and several parish halls. Gift donations from local churches and community organizations and individuals filled the shelves and the store was staffed with scores of volunteers from Sin Fronteras and the community.

Iliana, 11, joined her grandmother to tote a hefty black garbage bag filled with trinkets that cost 50 cents to $5. Old enough to understand the prices were far better than Wal-Mart, Iliana was careful when choosing toys for her younger siblings and cousins. But she’s far too young to give up her own Christmas wishes. Her grandmother found the extra $3 to buy her a bead set that Iliana promised to share with her sisters.

Money contributed by those who shopped at the store is used to fund HCC programs for the community.
“I’m the One Who Learns the Most!”

Susan Shetrom knew since the fourth grade that she wanted to be a teacher. She spent nearly four decades teaching students in public schools and now shares expertise tutoring adults in the GED program.

The retired math teacher said that tutoring at Hope CommUnity Center is often more satisfying than her teaching career.

“I spent 39 years teaching teenagers, some that didn’t want to learn,” she said. “Here everyone wants to be in the classroom and is eager to learn.”

Shetrom taught for 12 years in Pennsylvania, then moved to Orlando and taught math in Orange County for 27 years, 21 of them at Dr. Phillips High School. She grew up in a rural community in Central Pennsylvania and said she was rarely exposed to other cultures and ethnic groups until she moved to Florida.

After she retired, Susan volunteered at the Adult Literacy League and Apopka High School, where she met Sister Maureen White, who persuaded her to bring her tutoring skills to the community center.

She spends Tuesday and Thursday mornings teaching a group of a dozen students, who range in age from 19 to 74. They work on reading, writing, math, science and social studies skills that will help them acquire a General Equivalency Degree.

Sr. Maureen, who is in charge of educational services, said Susan brings a unique mix of talents to her volunteer job.

“Susan is so faithful and giving and has an incredible sense of humor,” said White. “Students feel no pressure but she gives them a sense of responsibility to achieve.”

Shetrom said her students often motivate her. She’s teaching a 74-year old who had a successful occupation but wants to earn her GED for her own satisfaction. One student wants to go on to culinary school, while many will use the diploma to get better jobs.

Students often thank her for tutoring, but Shetrom said she’s the one who has learned the most.

“No matter how I start the day, when I leave the center I’m smiling and laughing,” she said. “I feel so fortunate to have met so many awesome people, who have shared how they’ve struggled to get an education. They’re so inspiring and they give me great joy.”

HCC has been home to the Notre Dame Americorps service learning program of community engagement for over 15 years. The weekend reunion celebration in October was a love feast where memories are still vivid of the life-changing experience of the Americorps year of service. A conversation café and dinner, a morning of community service hosting children from the community and an evening dance was capped off by a Sunday picnic. All reported loving the opportunity to reconnect, to remember and renew a commitment to service. Service is transformative! It is not a myth! We saw it! We felt it! We know it!
The CCAN club at Apopka High School established and run by Karen Moran at Hope CommUnity Center has opened its hearts to the plight of the less fortunate. Recently, the club has participated in sorting and packaging food to be hand delivered to the homeless in the Orlando area. The students wanted to volunteer in a way that could make even a small difference in someone’s life. They chose to work with A Grateful Mind’s Meals on Wheels for the Homeless. It was a great experience! When the students started, no one knew what to expect. They worked in a small room packaging food in bags to be distributed to two different sites. At first, they believed there to be too much food. Little did they know the homeless population would be so large! Once the packaging was complete, they took the food to the first site. It quickly became evident there was not enough food to hand out. By the second site, there was such a large group of people needing food. As wonderful as it was to do something good, the students became discouraged by the desperate looks on the faces of the homeless. The students felt so much for these people, they have decided to continue volunteering with A Grateful Mind through the end of the school year; maybe longer. As a life lesson, seeing the people who are struggling to survive has motivated the students to work harder in school and set solid goals for their futures.

The College and Career Access program at HCC was started to help students interested in learning about college, financial aid, scholarships, essay writing, and financial planning. In addition, to helping students prepare for their future educational needs and goals. CCAN offers leadership opportunities, retreats and trips to colleges and universities and provides helpful information for parents.

Night of Hope and Diversity Event Will Raise Money for Scholars

Join us Saturday, March 2, 2013 for HCC’s Third Night of Hope and Diversity at Wekiva High School. We will be show casing the talent of our community as well as honoring four outstanding individuals from the Central Florida community who have dedicated their lives to helping others. Each of these four awardees have been an inspiration and support to Hope as well as to others both locally and globally. We will be honoring: Father Richard Walsh, St. Margaret Mary Church; Oscar Aguirre, Principal, Lovell Elementary; Dora Tora Nelson, La Prensa; and Dr. Kathryn Norsworthy, Rollins College.

Volante Jones, choreographer and professional dancer will join HCC for the evening and provide a special performance. Thanks to a sponsor, we were able to bring Ms. Jones in for a weekend to work with ten of our young women and to choreograph a beautiful piece that the girls have been working on for the past two months.

Our program will include dance, music and spoken word and will reflect our mission of empowerment through education, advocacy and spiritual development. If you want to attend, help through in-kind donations and/or provide sponsorship, please call chairperson, Mary Carroll, 407.880.4673 Ext: 236 or Development Director, Michael Cantillo at Ext: 227.
Hearts for Hope
Fundraising Luncheon

HCC’s first Hearts for Hope Luncheon will be held on Monday, February 11, 2013 at St. Margaret Mary Church’s Community Hall. The event is designed to tell the Hope CommUnity Center’s story…its history, current and future direction. You will also hear from several community members who will share what HCC has meant to them.

The goal is to raise funds for the operation of program and services such as our Nurturing Parenting Program, English and GED Classes and our Youth Group. We offer these to help empower the Central Florida immigrant and working poor communities through Education, Advocacy and Spiritual Growth. For more information please call Michael Cantillo, at 407-880-4673. The event is being held through the generosity of our sponsors. We are so very grateful to them.

Youth and CommUnity
Get and Give Meaning
To Thanksgiving

Youth from Sin Fronteras group and HCC’s Social Service Coordinator, Minerva Colon, made Thanksgiving a little brighter by collecting and delivering food to members of the community.

Ninety-five youth sorted food to make 271 bags that included all the traditional fixings for a Thanksgiving meal including 212 turkeys. They gathered at the Hope CommUnity Center during their school break to pack the groceries and deliver some of the bags to 60 families who could not pick it up at the center.

The food donations came from local churches, businesses and individuals. Some of the food was purchased from the Second Harvest Food Bank from money collected for the food drive. The annual Thanksgiving Food Drive is a tradition at HCC that started a decade ago with 25 families.
A Columbian woman who couldn’t bear the thought of leftovers going to waste organized a Thanksgiving Day feast at Hope Community Center that fed 225 people. Flor Tovar rallied the help of 85 volunteers to deliver a home-cooked Thanksgiving meal that included turkey and all the fixings, pork, salad, meatballs, homemade cookies, rice and beans. They set up a buffet-style service with aluminum trays full of food and invited everyone from the community to share the dinner.

This wasn’t the first time Tovar shared her Thanksgiving. A Thanksgiving meal at a friend’s house four years ago prompted her to start her own holiday tradition. She said she was shocked at the amount of leftovers and decided she would share her family’s bounty with people in need. The next Thanksgiving, she took dinner to the San Jose Mission in Pierson. Last year, she delivered the meal to a group in Tampa.

“I knew there were people in need in Apopka and decided that we could make a difference,” said Tovar, who owns Tovar Cleaners in Orlando.

She organized the details of the massive meal during breaks at work. She called friends who enlisted help from volunteers at All Souls, All Saints, St. Mary Magdalen and St. Augustine Catholic churches. Her husband, Ricardo, and their children, Ana Karini, Fernando and Valerie, also worked all day to prepare, set up and serve the dinner. Five HCC staff members, Roxanna Martel, Nilka Melendez, Minverva Colon, Olivia Reyes, Beth Riebel and youth from Sin Fronteras, helped during their day off to make the meal a success. All the volunteers sat down and ate with their guests after dinner was served.

“Everybody was happy and told me it was the best Thanksgiving they ever had,” said Tovar. “We want to come back next year.”

Tovar’s mission of philanthropy began nine years ago when she started hosting parties in her home and asked people to bring toys, clothes and backpacks to donate to poor families in Columbia. She started the Flor Foundation, which sends donations each month to Columbia. Last year, she collected 230 backpacks to donate to Columbian children.

“When I came to this country, I kept asking God how can I make a difference,” she said. “I realized that in this country, everybody has too much and many are willing to share.”
It is a Mexican cultural tradition to celebrate the Posadas the days before Christmas recalling the journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem and the birth of their baby in a stable because there was no room for them anywhere else. HCC recalled this story with the contemporary themes of rejection, exclusion, marginalization. Joseph, Mary and Jesus were migrants, immigrants, and refugees. Even our all powerful creator God traveled, migrated from a position of power to the vulnerable incarnation as a small poor powerless child. What a miracle! Do we really believe it? And, so at each house we remembered the present day suffering of undocumented immigrants, of divided immigrant families far from home, of refugees, of exploited “campesinos,” of abused women, of lost youth as we sang begging for entrance, for inclusion, for acceptance, for respect. It was powerful. Chalet North trailer community was filled with candles, song, love, good will and resolve to work for change. HCC made a difference celebrating popular religious tradition with contemporary meaning.
Hope Community Center is dedicated to the empowerment of Central Florida’s immigrant and working poor communities through education, advocacy and spiritual growth.

**Mission:**

Hope Community Center is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

1016 North Park Avenue
Apopka, FL 32712