

Spirit of giving: Students help out during holidays

BY ROSEMARY MARTINEZ

Community service is a year-round activity at Mary Immaculate Catholic School in Farmers Branch, but the spirit of giving in the students really flies into action during December.

"We have service projects each month that help our students understand the connection between community service and their Catholic faith," principal Nancy Russell said. "And as the Christmas season approaches, our students take stock of the blessings they have received during the year and realize just how fortunate their own families are. They then want to share their good fortune with others by reaching out beyond their usual community service."

The school choir sang traditional and modern holiday songs at the Farmers Branch Senior Center wearing Santa hats and jingle bells. The choir often uses American sign language to relay the words in tandem with their voices. Their music director, Vivian Marino, has been teaching the MIS students to sign as they sing since she joined the school in 1992.

Students also sent good wishes and greetings to the U.S. troops. Colored with crayons and markers

or glistening with glitter, the words on their Hero Letters reflect the discussions the students and teachers have as they work on their projects: "Come home safely," "I appreciate you" and "Thank you for keeping our world safe." One third-grade student summed it up the best: "I want to share God's love with the soldiers who are keeping us free."

The book drive for Children's Hospital in Dallas is perhaps the project that hits closest to home for the students. Held annually in memory of Kraig Frick, an MIS student who passed away in 1996 from an inoperable brainstem tumor, the book drive encourages families to contribute new or gently used books to children who must spend Christmas away from home. The third-graders decorate bookmarks to accompany the books, and the entire collection of gifts is sent to the Children's Hospital to help restock their Child Life library.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has a local branch that is assisted by the school's largest project for the month, a school-wide toy drive. The different grade levels are encouraged to donate gifts that are age-appropriate to their grade, so a very wide variety of toys are contributed. The toys are sorted by the students and then combined



PHOTOS SUBMITTED BY ROSEMARY MARTINEZ

Students show off their Hero Letters, which are sent to troops overseas during the holidays.

with gifts of food, clothing and household items donated by church families before a St. Vincent de Paul case worker delivers the entire package to eligible families in the community.

The school has been participating in the St. Vincent de Paul toy drive for more than 30 years, and it is a popular activity with the students.

"Not everyone has the same opportunities that our families have [to provide toys to their children]," said Andrian Collins, an eighth-grade student. "This toy drive helps us to give them that opportunity."

Jennifer Watts, the service project coordinator and teacher for the school, is proud of the efforts of MIS students and families.

"We have a very generous parish and school community," Watts said. "By providing different opportunities for service, the MIS school community is able to assist a variety of people with different needs."

Rosemary Martinez submits to neighborsgo on behalf of Mary Immaculate School.



Left: Mary Immaculate Catholic School students spent an afternoon entertaining at the senior center. Right: Students collected toys for St. Vincent de Paul.