

UNIVERSITY TIMES

Serving Faculty & Staff Since 1968

VOLUME 53
ISSUE 9: DECEMBER 18, 2020

University community steps up to help out this holiday season

Thursday, December 17, 2020

By **SUSAN JONES**

This time of year often brings a flood of options for how to help out others. There are toy drives, free meals and multiple ways to donate. The pandemic has made many of these efforts a bit more challenging in 2020, but that hasn't stopped members of the Pitt community from stepping up to do their part.

Pitt–Bradford

WAYS TO HELP OUT

In lieu of the annual Christmas Day at Pitt event, the University and its community partners are working together to identify and create opportunities for assistance and support. Here are some ways you can help out:

- **Holiday wish lists:** Fulfill the holiday wish lists of Hill District youth through a partnership with Macedonia FACE. Find the wish lists on Amazon [here](#) and [here](#). When checking out, change the shipping address to the Gift Registry address so you don't send the items to yourself. There is no hard and fast deadline for purchasing Amazon items as FACE staff is prepared to get items to family through the end of the year.
- **Office of Child Development Book Drive:** OCD is collecting anti-racism books for schools and childcare centers throughout the region. Purchase a book or make a monetary donation [here](#).
- **Community Kitchen PGH:** Consider supporting this organization either by purchasing holiday meals and catering or by donating. Learn more about the Community Kitchen and their efforts to upskill and strengthen communities through food service.

- **Pittsburgh Restaurant Workers Aid:** Support local restaurant and hospitality workers by making a monetary donation or purchasing an item for their holiday drive.
- **Shop 2 Help Oakland:** Show your support for your favorite shops, restaurants, retailers, and other businesses by purchasing a gift card.
- **Shop vendors** from The Black Market: Holiday Edition online
- **Find additional volunteer opportunities** via Pittsburgh Cares or the United Way of Southwestern PA

The Pitt-Bradford campus collaborated this year with the “ELF Fund,” a local program that provides gifts for less fortunate children and seniors during the holiday season. “Elves” choose a tag with the recipients wish list, purchase and wrap a gift, and return it to ELF headquarters for distribution to families. The ELF Fund fulfills hundreds of tags and ensures that every child and senior in the area has something under the tree Christmas morning.

This year, the ELF Fund was almost without a home to collect, sort and distribute gifts until Pitt-Bradford offered the use of a recently purchased building that will become part of the campus footprint next year. The building provided volunteers with the space, facilities and access for socially distanced “drive-through” gift drop off and pick up. In addition, Pitt-Bradford faculty, staff and the Habitat for Humanity student organization filled 50 gift tags for the fund.

Pitt-Greensburg

- Since 1998, the Housing & Residence Life office at Pitt-Greensburg has coordinated a Christmas party for the Jeannette Head Start. Although they weren’t able to host the kids on campus this year, they were still able to give something to the children and their families. Faculty, staff and students came together to buy gifts for 32 children and more than \$1,500 in Giant Eagle gift cards to their families. The deadline to participate was Nov. 17, and Troy Ross and Brian Root, director and assistant director of Housing & Residence Life, respectively, dropped off the gifts the week of Nov. 29. Students from SPSEA, a pre-professional association for students in education, helped provide personalized messages from Santa for each child.
- The campus also participated in preparing Chemo Totes that will be distributed to patients receiving chemotherapy. This fall, the campus community was invited to sponsor bags or donate toward the purchase of items for the bags. The totes typically contain everything from blankets to knitted hats, along with a personalized tag. Holly Hallman, whose husband Craig is an assistant men’s basketball coach at Pitt-Greensburg, started this project with 48 totes in 2017. In 2019, the project had grown to 415 totes hand-packed by volunteers and delivered to patients in the Greensburg area. Pitt-Greensburg’s men’s and women’s basketball teams have assisted with the packing and delivery of the totes, which usually occurs during winter recess, and they’ll be back at it again this year while incorporating prescribed COVID-19 protocols. Brody Jackson and Kelsey Oddis, the men’s and women’s basketball coaches, respectively, organize the contributions and the distribution process for the teams.

CFO's office

People in the Office of the Chief Financial Officer support the Treasures for Children campaign that's managed by the Salvation Army of Southwestern PA. This year, employees in the CFO's office, as well as from Business and Operations, provided specific gifts that were requested by 130 children. Gifts were shipped directly to Salvation Army headquarters in downtown Pittsburgh. Staff also made direct contributions to the Salvation Army to support the program. This effort is led by Stacey Czerniejewski and Katrina Lowe in the CFO's office.

School of Social Work

The School of Social Work had two opportunities for people to help out this holiday season. During previous years, the school has supported a toy drive for Primary Care Health Services in the Hill District. Because of the pandemic, Primary Care scaled back from its annual toy drive and instead asked for gifts cards to be purchased from major retailers, such as Target, Walmart and Giant Eagle, and then mailed or dropped off at its Centre Avenue office.

For those who were looking forward to purchasing gifts or wanted to help sort, wrap or deliver gifts to children in need, the School of Social Work partnered with the Latino Community Center's Navidad in Pittsburgh program. Participants could buy presents from gifts tags on an Amazon wish list or send gift cards or volunteer to wrap and deliver gifts. Overall, the community center had 483 children who were sponsored by people throughout Pittsburgh.

Office of University Communications

The Office of University Communications and Marketing was able to coordinate a gift drive for 54 children from the Hilltop Community Children's Center in Pittsburgh's Knoxville neighborhood entirely remotely this year, since everyone is working from home. Instead of a whiteboard in the office with paper stockings, an online sign-up chart was created both for those who were buying gifts and "Helper Elves," who were designated to pick up the gifts from each person. The office has been providing gifts to the center for 25 years.

Pitt Athletics

Celeste Welsh, director of Media Operations and Community Engagement, and Pitt Athletics stepped in to host a drive in support of the Community Empowerment Association's Annual Kwanzaa Celebration. Usually, a number of gifts from the Christmas Day at Pitt dinner get picked up and driven to Homewood by the association's staff. This year, Pitt is bringing the gifts to them. More than 100 gifts will be dropped off Dec. 18 with help from Dave Huey of Facilities Management and the transportation team

Office of Human Research Protection

Every year, the Office of Human Research Protection, part of Pitt Research, does some type of charity project in lieu of exchanging gifts in the office. In the past, they have adopted families and kids to give gifts, participated in the Foster Love Project drive for backpacks for

foster kids, and collected for the women's shelter. Last year, they also held a food and fund drive for the Greater Pittsburgh Food Bank and went to the food bank in February to volunteer for a day.

This year, they decided to raise money for the Greater Pittsburgh Food Bank with an online fund drive, since "the need is even greater with the pandemic and people out of work," Erin Holmes Grabowski, quality assessment specialist, said in an email. "The food bank can really stretch a dollar and can do so much more with a monetary donation than with a food donation."

The fund drive launched on Dec. 8 with a goal of \$1,000. The Office of Research Protections also is participating in the drive, along with family and friends.

School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences

The Audiology group provides free hearing aids for individuals in need in the Southwestern PA area through two programs at the Birmingham Free Clinic and the Squirrel Hill Health Center. This program depends on Communication Science and Disorders faculty and students, UPMC Audiology, the Eye and Ear Foundation, and the Schweitzer Foundation (the students involved are Schweitzer Fellows). Even during COVID, they have continued to run this program and support these individuals.

In addition, the Student Academy of Audiology Chapter at Pitt this fall collected aluminum tabs that were recycled for the Ronald McDonald House along with toiletries to make Welcome Bags that were provided to families staying in the house.

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