

20TH ANNUAL TOYS FOR JOY GETS BIGGEST TURNOUT AT EL CAJON SITE

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By Janis Russell

December 14, 2015 (El Cajon) – Over 5,000 people attended Toys for Joy at El Cajon Valley High School on December 12th, according to Pastor Miles McPherson of the Rock Church. For many of the children in need present, these may be the only toys they receive this Christmas season.

El Cajon Valley is the newest location added to last year's Toys for Joy, which the Rock Church has organized for the past 20 years. The event started at Lincoln High and now also includes San Marcos and Southwest high schools.

Holly Crawford, a volunteer, told East County Magazine, "Last year, a little over 3,000 toys were given away. This year, 5,200 toys were donated in East County. There's actual growth every year."

Crawford had reported that when she got to the school at 8 a.m. 700 people had already lined up. By 2 p.m., there were more than 3,000.

ECM checked out the toy room in the school's gymnasium and spoke with Sara Suter, the toy room's team lead and a volunteer. When asked how long it takes to plan this event, Suter said, "It starts in July. But it really gets moving in September." As far as advertising, Suter said that they go to all the

local schools and apartment complexes. Miles Ahead Ministry came up with the name "Toys for Joy."

When asked if many of the same volunteers return year after year, she said, "Yes." There were 900 volunteers in the East County location. As far as any other upcoming events, it won't be until Easter. Suter also added that their first kid came at 3 a.m. and received the toy he wanted when they let him in by 9:30am. People who have helped out at Lincoln have flocked to El Cajon to help when it expanded to El Cajon last year.



Next ECM went to the groceries section. Denise McKai, team leader, mentioned that 12 pallets of food were delivered from the San Diego Food Bank. Thirty volunteers put together 600 bags that included "cans of veggies, casseroles, pasta, and dessert among other foods. Families were allowed to get one or two bags.

The special needs room was next on our tour, for kids with disabilities. Tyler Norsworthy, the team lead for this room, said the Rock Church of East County has two services accommodating special needs kids. So far, by 10:30 a.m., 40 kids had come through that room.

"It not only makes special needs kids feel special, but it gives them a place to feel loved," Norsworthy added. Some had cognitive disabilities, and some can't handle big crowds. They get one on one attention and crafts, plus they can get a big toy plus two small toys.

Rock Church of East County's Associate Pastor, Greg Hendricks, wanted to emphasize the amazing volunteers that put this together. "This is the fastest, most expedited," he said of the event.

There were also a family zone with Astro jumps, entertainment, a petting zoo, crafts, haircuts, a photo booth, face painting, a chance to win prizes, and games. A free lunch of hot dogs and chips with drinks was served. Arabic and Spanish translators were available. The gospel was shared in multiple languages throughout the day. Even Santa Claus and Mrs. Claus, Teresa and

Ronnie Holdersby, who are also El Cajon residents, stopped by. There were different booths from different businesses and from ministries of the Rock Church.

Crawford emphasized, "The purpose of this event is to share God's love."



Near the end of the event, Hendricks thanked everyone who came to support Toys for Joy and introduced civic leaders and elected officials. These included State Senator Joel Anderson, El Cajon Police Chief Jim Davis, El Cajon city Mayor Bill Wells, and El Cajon city Council members Star Bales and Bob McClellan. Senator Anderson gave Pastor Miles McPherson a certificate, congratulating church leaders. Then Hendricks closed by saying a blessing over everyone.

According to a Toys for Joy brochure with fun facts, this was founded by McPherson. This event annually provides free toys, a free lunch, free groceries, and some sites offer free clothing to San Diego's families in need at Christmastime. Sixteen years and 87,000 children and families later, Toys for Joy has grown into one of the largest Christmas events of its kind in San Diego County, where one in five San Diego kids are living below the poverty level.

For the toy room, at each location, the gym was converted into a magical toy room. For the family zone, the food courts cooked 32,000 hot dogs between all the sites. All locations had a family stage with entertainment.

For the clothing room, every family has been given an opportunity to fill a 13 gallon bag with whatever clothing items they choose. Many families, local businesses and churches held clothing drives to support the event. Rock Thrift Store allocated all Sunday clothing collections from October-December to Toys for Joy families. In 2014, 2,400 guests received clothing. Every year, children's and men's clothing are gone in a few hours; the need for clothing is great.

For the family zone, about 12,000 bags of groceries were handed out at all the sites. One in four households with children don't have enough food to properly feed their families. Over 4,000 people helped out with groceries on December 12.

More information about Toys for Joy can be found at <http://www.toys-for-joy.org>.

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