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SPOTLIGHT

Volunteers bring holiday cheer to Benedictine

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Benedictine School students who live at the school during the holidays are eager to open donated gifts delivered by Judi Cornett.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

RIDGELY — Around the world, children went to bed on Christmas Eve with the wish of waking up to gifts under the tree. A part of the popular custom of the holiday season, Christmas morning is a time filled with innocence, wonder and joy — a wish and a tradition that one group of volunteers wanted to ensure came true for the students at Benedictine School.

As a co-ed day and residential education program, the school is the learning and living home for 32 children with developmental disabilities during the holiday. Thanks to the creation of a trust benefiting the kids at Benedictine, established this year, the gift-giving tradition is one bound to continue for years to come.

Of all the places for a Christmas wish to be realized, this one began on a warm day on the Chesapeake Bay.

For too many years to count, Judi Cornett, a speech therapist and 40-year employee of Benedictine, has sailed with Ebby DuPont as part of their membership at the Chesapeake Bay Boat Club. On one sunny day on the Bay, the two began talking about the students at Benedictine — the many challenges and triumphs the children and adults with developmental disabilities encounter.

It was then that DuPont knew he wanted to help make an impact in the lives of the students served by Benedictine — but how?

“He was inspired,” Cornett said, “and his eagerness to support the kids continues to inspire all of us.”

As the then-vice president of the Chesapeake Bay Antique and Classic Boat Society, DuPont knew he was in a unique position to do something meaningful for the kids. He decided to sponsor a float at the St. Michaels Christmas parade.

With the vision of school students taking in the wonders of a town adorned in decorations and singing carols from the bow of a classic boat, DuPont’s dream started to take shape. That was 15 years ago.

Now, what started as one float has become three. Each year, riding and caroling on the Benedictine School float provides students with cherished experiences.

“A young girl came up to me after the parade one year, and with a firm handshake said, ‘Thank you, that was the first time I have ever been on a boat or in a parade,’” DuPont said. “And for me, that was the greatest gift because it came from the heart without a parent or chaperone telling her to thank me.”

DuPont’s dream, with the help of a few equally inspired boat enthusiasts at the Antique and Classic Boat Society, along with a few Benedictine staff, continues to grow.

After discovering many students spend Christmas at their home at Benedictine, DuPont turned to his association to raise money to buy gifts for each student staying at Benedictine for the holidays.



Throughout the year, a small team of volunteer Secret Santas raises money, then purchases and wraps gifts for each student. Because of their efforts, the children spending the holidays on campus are guaranteed to have presents to open.

“We find out what the kids interests are, their sizes and their allergies, and make a list,” Cornett said. “We buy clothes, toys and blankets. But we also buy the basics like toiletries — and always at least one fun, thoughtful gift.”

The group of volunteers wanted to ensure this tradition continues each year and well into the future.

“In an effort to continue this work, the volunteers got together to create a trust,” Cornett said. “This is the first year the trust will be in effect. The trust ensures this gift-giving continues forever, and makes it so that anyone can contribute, not just members of the Chesapeake Bay Boat Club.”

The Chesapeake Bay Boat Club Fund is a component of the Mid-Shore Community Foundation, a public foundation designated as a 501(c)(3). The fund supports the Chesapeake Bay Boat Club’s annual Christmas activities for the benefit of the Benedictine School students.

Gifts to the fund are fully tax-deductible, as allowed by law. Contributions may be made by check payable to MSCF/Chesapeake Bay Boat Club Fund and delivered to Mid-Shore Community Foundation, or online at www.mscf.org. Donors interested in making stock contributions are encouraged to contact nmorris@mscf.org for transfer instructions.

“Ebby and his friends have fostered relationships with the community that supports our various programs, and is quick to tell anyone how special our students are,” said Julie Hickey, education director, Benedictine School. “Ebby has enriched the lives of so many of our students throughout the years — he is special to Benedictine in so many ways.”