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OPERATION CHRISTMAS CHILD

## Gift-filled shoe boxes spread holiday spirit 18,000 collected locally for shipment overseas

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Christmas arrives exactly one month from today, but thousands of area residents already have demonstrated their holiday spirit by donating gift boxes full of good cheer for underprivileged children around the world.

"It's a great way to show the Gospel message in action," said Rick Jackson, vice president of Glass City Food Services in Holland, Ohio.

The gift-wrapped shoe boxes, collected for a ministry called Operation Christmas Child, are filled with toys and personal items and are shipped to impoverished areas in 95 nations.

But first they have to be collected at regional centers spread across the United States, and Monday was the deadline for local collections.

About 20 volunteers, from elementary school students to senior citizens, spent Monday at Christian television station WLMB-TV (Channel 40) in Perrysburg, busily preparing 18,346 shoe boxes for shipment to North Carolina, home base of Operation Christmas Child, and the Rev. Franklin Graham's organization, Samaritan's Purse.

Mr. Jackson was standing in the back of a 53-foot semi-truck trailer, helping to stack rows of square cardboard cartons that each contained between 10 and 12 shoe boxes.

He said his company specializes in supplying ice cream shops and because the work is seasonal, he keeps his employees busy and working by having them assemble and stuff shoe boxes with such items as puzzles, crayons, stuffed animals, toy cars, dolls, kazoos, and personal hygiene items including toothbrushes, combs, and wash cloths.

Between Glass City and his church, Mayfair-Plymouth Congregational Church on Bennett Road, Mr. Jackson collected 2,900 shoe boxes this year.

Inside WLMB, a group of boys from age 8 to 17, wearing green Army-type shirts decorated with badges and patches, were busy stacking shoe boxes, taping up cartons, and carrying the smaller boxes outside.

The boys were members of Alert Cadets, a national Christian-based organization that performs a wide range of community services. This troop, from Cecil, Ohio, even took a trip to the Gulf Coast to help victims of Hurricane Katrina.

"It's like the Boy Scouts, but the fathers are required to participate," said Kevin Atkins, 36, a second lieutenant who brought 10 cadets to WLMB to help on the last and busiest collection day.

"We thank the Lord that we are able to help," said his son, 12-year-old Garret Atkins. "It's hard work, but it pays off by helping the kids overseas."

Also helping out were Nathan, Luke, and Justin Mugge, three Perrysburg teenagers who are homeschooled and take a week off every year to help out at WLMB. During the lulls, they play soccer in the parking lot. But on Monday, it was nonstop work.

Nathan, 16, said he and his 15-year-old twin brothers get credit for community service hours, but that's not the main reason why they volunteer.

"I really do like doing this," he said. "It's good physical work. God has blessed me with a strong body and I like to use it to serve God."

Operation Christmas Child began in 1992 and since then nearly 50 million shoe boxes have been sent to children around the world. At the headquarters in Boone, N.C., each shoe box is opened and inspected — the lids are wrapped separately from the boxes themselves — and a Bible tract in the appropriate language is then added. Those who donate the shoe boxes are also asked to contribute \$7 toward the cost of shipping.

Samaritan's Purse enlists local Christian pastors to distribute the shoe boxes to children, ages 2 to 14, in their region, according to Jamey Schmitz, general manager and CEO of WLMB. The goal is to get the communities involved and to encourage the children to attend their local church.

WLMB has been the regional collection center for six years and has gathered more than 100,000 shoe boxes from more than 200 churches and countless individuals and organizations.

He said the groups range from home Bible studies to quilting clubs, who make Operation Christmas Child a pet project.

On Monday, as soon as one truck was unloaded at the TV station, another one backed up and was ready for volunteers to start transferring boxes into a trailer.

Dan Bollinger of Pilgrim Church, which serves as a local collection center for West Toledo, delivered a truckload Monday containing 2,100 shoeboxes. CedarCreek in Perrysburg Township contributed 1,185 shoeboxes this year.



Volunteers at the collection center at WLMB-TV load boxes to be shipped to underprivileged kids in other nations.  
( THE BLADE/HERRAL LONG )

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