

Mom Takes Over Daughter's Holiday Effort

By Katherine Tam
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There is no Christmas tree in Edna Campbell's house. Nor are there Christmas lights.

And that suits her just fine. She prefers to funnel the family's money and energy elsewhere during the holidays.

Just as they've done the last three years, Campbell, her family and like-minded volunteers will spend Christmas Day feeding and clothing Richmond's poor. They hope to reach 400 this year, four times the number they served in 2006 when they first began Christmas in Richmond.

"Our family, we don't do the traditional Christmas," said Campbell, who was born and raised in North Richmond. "This is our Christmas."

Donations of clothes, sleeping bags and toys have been slower than usual, likely due in part to the recession. Campbell hopes the donation barrels on her porch and at the real estate office where she works will fill up over the next two weeks.

Campbell knows about economic struggle. She lost her house to foreclosure last year and moved in with relatives in Hercules.

"It really makes me appreciate what I've got," she said.

Christmas in Richmond got its start three years ago when Campbell's daughter, Burgundie Spears, came home from Howard University in Washington D.C., with new respect for how blessed her family was and decided to take the spirit of giving communitywide. She sought donations from grocery stores, toy stores and other businesses the family frequents, and peppered North Richmond and Central Richmond with fliers about the event. That year, they served 100 people.

"The feeling was so gratifying that we decided to change the way we celebrate Christmas," Campbell said. "To see people broken trying on coats—it was a new perspective of what Christmas was all about."

They served 200 people the following year, she said, and 300 in 2008.

Spears, 24, now lives in Texas, where she is launching a similar effort. But her mother, determined to continue Christmas in Richmond, is organizing locally with Spears' help via e-mail and Facebook. Spears plans to deliver food to the needy in Texas through Meals on Wheels before Christmas, then come to Richmond to help here.

Especially in the economic downturn, locals could use some of that holiday cheer.

"Richmond needs a lot of help," said the Rev. William Coleman, pastor of Praise Fellowship Bible Church, in Richmond. "A lot of people in Richmond don't have the opportunity to experience the joy of Christmas."

So Coleman and other church members help with outreach, donations, serving food and sorting clothes,

Others offer to help too. Mike and Renee Rowland use their Windermere Realty office at 400 Appian Way as a donation drop-off site. Donors last year came from around the East Bay and from as far as Guerneville, even on Christmas Eve.

People would open their trunks and come in with bags' of donations," Renee Rowland said. "We couldn't believe it."