

Homeless Parents Get to Play Santa at Stamford Shelter

By Nora Naughton

STAMFORD — Amid a raucous birthday party, 8-year-old Kat thought hard about what she'd like from Santa this year.

"I just want Santa to be with my mom," she said after a long pause.

A third-grader at Davenport Ridge Elementary, Kat is among the newer residents at Inspirica, one of city's two homeless shelters. She and her father came to Stamford from South Carolina just before the school year started, while her mother stayed behind.



When Kat realized she could ask Santa for a toy, she went deep into thought again.

"What is that called, the little doll?" Kat asked, trying to recall the toy she desired. "Oh, a Barbie. I would ask for a Barbie. I had a little Barbie once, but my dad had to throw it away."

Kat, who turns 9 next week, often lumps her birthday and Christmas together. For some children, that would mean twice the presents. But for Kat, it has often meant a double disappointment.

"I'm excited that I get to be with my dad for Christmas this year," she said. "There was one Christmas and one birthday when my dad wasn't there at all."

Kat is unaware of a surprise in store for her this Christmas. In addition to the quality time she'll have with her father, she also may get that Barbie.

Inspirica transforms its gym into Santa's workshop, as he and his jolly elves prepare for the big day. Many of the children — for whom the gym is off limits until Dec. 25 — don't know there are presents for them behind those doors.

"They really have no idea, but it's still so exciting to them," said Inspirica spokeswoman Lauren Dubinsky, who leads the shelter's holiday gift collection. "Last year, we let them come in to peek after everything had been wrapped up. It was just a room full of bags, but they were still so excited."

Continued on next page ...

The annual toy drive, a partnership between Inspirica and similar area agencies, benefits 3,000 homeless children who will each receive two presents — one for amusement and another educational gift — this holiday season. On Saturday, more than 500 volunteers gathered in the gym to wrap 6,000 toys.

The gifts earmarked for the kids in Inspirica housing go directly to their parents, who place the presents under their tree on Christmas morning.

“It gives these parents a chance to be Santa for once,” Dubinsky said. “I love seeing the kids’ faces, but knowing that parents too will be able to be a normal parent and not have to choose between necessities or gifts this year means a lot.”

Dubinsky said she is inspired by children like Kat. Being her first — and hopefully last — Christmas at Inspirica, she’s not expecting anything.

“It feels so good when you saw a child’s present come in and then after Christmas they run up to you and they want to show you the new shoes or the Barbie they always wanted,” she said. “And then the parents are always smiling in the background.”

But for Kat, being somewhere safe and warm this holiday season, seems enough of a present. “I’m glad Miss Tracy gave us a room,” she said. “I’ve met new friends and I have a lot of fun here. This year, I’ll get to be with my dad and we’ll call my mom. It will be good.”

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