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Bringing the holidays to those in need

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Members of the Brentwood Regional Community Chest Board, from left, are co-president Kevin King, secretary Lill Pierce, treasurer Jane Rodriguez and co-president Dana Eaton. Photo by Aly Brown.

Photo by Aly Brown

The holiday season of giving is one of the most magical times of the year, but for many, it's also the most stressful.

When little ones are expecting a visit from Saint Nicholas, not having money can be especially heartbreaking. That's why members of the Brentwood Regional Community Chest (BRCC) come together every year to support local families with an annual food and toy drive. People who need a little extra support can fill out an

application and participate in the event, which services residents from Brentwood, Byron, Discovery Bay, Knightsen and Bethel Island.

The behind-the-scenes crew of volunteers works for months ahead of time, raising funds, stuffing envelopes, sorting toys and packing food. For many, it's become a tradition to volunteer.

"The really neat thing about this program is that it's completely run by the community, for the community," said Dana Eaton, the BRCC co-president. "It's a real unifier."

Girl Scouts, churches, schools and families all come together to make this happen, and every hand is needed. The toy sorting requires anywhere from 75 to 100 people, working for hours to get the donations in order for families in need; the food packing requires 500 people, and local farmers and businesses help by loaning equipment and donating food. Additionally, Napa Auto Parts hosts a car show for the BRCC, raising thousands of dollars, and Precision Cabinets donates bicycles. Even some residents who received AT&T settlement checks have donated to this cause.

Donation barrels are all over town, collecting toys for the drive, but most of the toys are purchased using funds raised from participating businesses and individuals.

"Every year, we have to shop, and every year I panic, thinking we won't have enough," BRCC Secretary Lill Pierce said, chuckling. "But every year, we get it, so I guess I just need to stop worrying."

Families can begin submitting applications to receive toys and food on Nov. 22, and the giveaway event will take place at Brentwood Elementary School in mid-December. Individuals check in, get their toys and head back out to their cars to drive through the loop and receive their food, which includes a turkey dinner. During this time, the Brentwood Rotary makes pancakes for families and

volunteers, while a DJ plays Christmas music. The entire event takes about two hours.

"It's amazing what the community does and gives," said Jane Rodriguez, BRCC treasurer.

The BRCC manages to fine-tune the process each year, evolving a little bit to accommodate the process, explained Pierce. The families will now arrive in shifts to ensure the lanes of traffic don't get too congested.

It's an emotional event, filled with tears, hugs and thank-you notes from grateful families who otherwise wouldn't have a Christmas.

For more information, contact Dana Eaton at deaton@brentwood.k12.ca.us or visit www.brcchest.org.