

Christmas with Jackson County CASA

December will be a special month for children supported by Jackson County Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) directed by Frances Allsup, and the Youth Court, presided over by Judge Sharon Sigalas. Santa Claus becomes a reality for local children due to community contributions to the CASA effort and the Youth Court.

The Quota International Club of the Mississippi Gulf Coast will be delivering “Shoeboxes of Love” for distribution by CASA. "Shoeboxes of Love" was inspired when Quotarians from all around the world, shipped 300 shoeboxes full of Christmas gifts to the children of the Coast after Katrina. The MS Gulf Coast Club delivered them on Christmas Eve, 2005, and has continued the idea each year since then.

Quota members, their families and friends, "adopt" a child, and stuff a shoebox full of age appropriate toys and gifts. This year, the 40 member club will be collecting shoeboxes for CASA in Jackson County, as well as the children in the Harrison County Youth Shelter, for a total of 65 boxes.

Quota International is a worldwide service organization with members in 14 countries. Its primary mission is to assist the speech and hearing impaired, as well as disadvantaged women and children. The MS Gulf Coast chapter is celebrating Quota's 90th birthday, by performing 90 acts of service before April 30th. Their service area covers the three coastal counties of Harrison, Jackson and Hancock counties.

The gifts provided by the Quota Club will be supplemented by unique ornaments, gifts, Christmas stockings, afghans, and flannel blankets made and donated by CASA Advocates and supporters.

Inducted as a CASA Advocate in June of this year, Laura Taylor spearheads the “Friends of CASA” volunteer organization. Friends of CASA created personalized felt angel ornaments for the children as part of the Christmas effort. Additional focus for Christmas 2008 included pocket tissue covers used as throws for local Christmas Parades to promote the name of CASA within Jackson County. This organization works throughout the year providing support to CASA through needlework, crafts, bake sales and other activities.

Mary Ellen Spalding has been an active Advocate, first in California and now in Mississippi. Mary balances her time promoting the best interests of children, and hand-crocheting Christmas stockings for December delivery every year. When asked what drives Mary to make these stockings, she replied “I make them because I have the time, the yarn, and I love doing something special for the children who get so little.” Using a stockpile of yarn donated by the community, Mary delivered 40 stockings in 2007 alone.

Zachry Construction in Pascagoula has donated all of the stocking stuffers to fill the special made stockings that will be given to the children that have a CASA advocate.

Debbie Braudis joined the ranks of CASA Advocates in 2008. A new volunteer, Mrs. Braudis followed Mary Ellen’s lead, using her own needlework skills as an extension of service to CASA. With the help of yarn donations from co-workers at Northrop Grumman Shipuilding, Debbie has finished 30 afghans and blankets for distribution.

This project is very important to Mrs. Braudis, who says “I believe all children respond to the comfort of a warm, cuddly blanket. I learned to crochet when I was 9 years old, and enjoy experimenting with colors and designs. Making these afghans is an

opportunity to give something of myself.” Her effort is an extension of a project she conducted during the months following Hurricane Katrina. From November 2005 to March 2006, she crocheted and distributed over 50 afghans to children located in Jackson, Harrison and Hancock counties as well as 35 flannel blankets provided by her daughter, Leah Cuthbert. Debbie was assisted in her efforts at that time by Dina Gebhart and Tremellah McInnis, fellow employees at the shipyard.

These women, in addition to Leah Walling, Jessica Toler and Pam Knight have continued to assist with Debbie’s 2008 goal of unique afghans for CASA’s children through their yarn donations. CASA’s goal for 2009 is 50 afghans and flannel blankets. Community support through donations of yarn, flannel or finished afghans will help achieve this.

Additional handmade gifts were provided by the Ocean Springs’ Church of Christ Ladies’ Group. These women spent 2008 creating toys and hand-crafted items to be added to the bundle of Christmas presents earmarked for children in Jackson County.

Primary contributor to the Court Appointed Special Advocate program is United Way of Jackson and George County, with many thanks to Northrop Grumman Shipbuilding for their continued support.