

# HELPING OUT PLANO'S christmas cops

by cindy boykin

## Shoal Creek neighbors continue their holiday tradition

**T**HE FIRST TIME Shoal Creek residents adopted families through the Christmas Cops program, they were given wish lists with simple requests: socks, underwear, a new coat, towels, toothbrushes.

Janie Burke and Alice Brumback were moved by such ordinary needs during the most festive time of year. But that was no ordinary year. Hurricane Katrina had driven thou-

sands from their homes and into distant communities like Plano.

From that experience, a tradition was created. This Christmas season marks the fourth year that Shoal Creek will help brighten the holidays for families in need. Janie and Alice are again heading up this project that actively involves their neighborhood children, teens and adults.



*Janie Burke and Alice Brumback head the effort in Shoal Creek.*

“Right after Thanksgiving, we get the list of families, usually 10 families, and we start filling their requests,” Janie explains. “The requests are never over-the-top things. They don’t ask for three Barbies, they ask for one—and they don’t even say which one. Or they ask for *a* movie or *a* game. Sometimes the kids will ask for something totally random, and we try to get it for them. Last year it was Bratz. It’s funny, every kid wants what’s hot that year...”

“...and that’s what you *really* want to get them,” Alice chimes in. “When their friends at school say, ‘I got a Bratz doll,’ they can say, ‘I did too!’”

Bikes usually make the list as well. The homeowners get about 12 bikes each year, “complete with helmets and knee pads,” Alice reassures police officer Aaron Benzick, who is the patrol officer for the neighborhood and a Christmas Cops volunteer.

Officer Benzick enjoys working with this unique program for several reasons. Of course he is happy to provide families with memorable Christmases, but he also hopes his involvement makes a positive impression on the children.

“A lot of times when I go to somebody’s house, it’s not under the best of circumstances,” Benzick says. “So it’s nice for the kids to see us doing something positive directly with them. This is my motivation for being a part of the program.”

As he eluded, police officers are typically dispatched to homes where the families are in some type of crisis. While surveying the situation, officers see needs that are going unmet. They take that opportunity to learn more about the families and submit their names for consideration for the program.

If a family wants to participate, they write a wish list, along with the age, sex, and size of each child. Commonly, the households have several generations under one roof.

Janie said, “Sometimes parents have requests, but sometimes they don’t, so we just give them something. One year I had a street in the neighborhood donate

shawls, because a lot of these families have a mother and grandmother in the same house. We've given some larger items, too. Last year Roomstore donated a table, Wal-Mart donated a microwave, and Alice got one family some pots and pans."

**G**ift buying for teenagers is important because they are sometimes overlooked in deference to the needs of younger children. Janie and Alice, perceptive moms that they are, keep an eye out for things they think teenagers would like for Christmas.

"Janie will assign a family and describe what a 12-year-old girl is asking for," Alice says, "but I know, *this is what she wants!* I always try to get a little something extra, perfume or makeup or a purse that's cool right now."

"Wallets make nice gifts for teenage boys," Janie adds. "I'm always picking up wallets on sale."

By the time they host the neighborhood Breakfast with Santa and gift-gathering party in mid-December, they've already filled most of the boxes with requested gifts. Participation in the 242-home neighborhood is high.

"About 90 percent participate...and if they don't, we call them again!" Alice laughed.

In the best of American traditions, Christmas is the time for giving: giving to people we love, people we appreciate, even



Profile photos

Look for the **Christmas Cops** boxes around town and join (from left) **Janie Burke**, Shoal Creek Homeowners Association president **Kerrie Liebowitz**, **Alice Brumback**, and members of the Plano Police Department including officer **Aaron Benzick** in making the holidays a little brighter for area families.

people we don't know. Residents of Shoal Creek will never know the young boy who beams at the sight of a new bicycle on Christmas morning or the adolescent girl who feels pretty as she applies new makeup. But they will know that Christmas was celebrated the way it was intended, as a time of giving. ■

**If your neighborhood or organization would like to adopt a family through the **Christmas Cops** program, call Heather Bowden at 972.941.2295. For a list of drop-off locations, visit [planopolice.org](http://planopolice.org).**