



To Grandmother's House We Go

When a Loved One Can't Be Home for Christmas

by Angela Myers

There's no place like home for Christmas. But if you can't be home....“This is the next best place I'd rather be,” said Lillian Coates.

Lillian has lived at Fair Havens Christian Home for “four or five years,” since she came in for therapy after a hospital stay and, “Every time I went to go home, something would happen.” She's 73 years old, but tells people she's 40. When one of her seven grandchildren called her on it, asking how she could have sons older than she is, she just answered, “I had them before I was born.”

Lillian expects to spend Christmas Day with a son who lives in Decatur (the other two aren't too far away in Rockford), but long before that she'll start to enjoy Christmas at Fair Havens.

“We have a Christmas tree out in the entry in memory of all the people at Fair Havens who have died. Each one has a little angel with his or her name on it. There's a bigger tree in the dining room. I don't know who decorates it, but they do a wonderful job. You just feel the Christmas spirit.”

Across town at Hickory Point Christian Village, Juetta Hiser, 93, Mildred Zinn, 90, and Pat Rebok, 84, are helping Cindy Canady, Activity Director, prove that you're never too

old to serve God—and that sometimes you can serve God by buying shoes. “We say that as long as there's breath in the body, we have work to do for God,” said Cindy.

She means that as a general affirmation, but she's also speaking specifically about Operation Christmas Child. Starting in November, the three residents comb the Dollar Store for a variety of small gifts. Using money collected from other residents as well as their own, they select items for boys and girls of a wide age-range—pencils, crayons, caps, mittens, miniature cars, socks, scissors....

Then they collect shoeboxes, many of which are donated by Mildred's daughter, Andrea Williams. “My daughter saves shoe boxes for us because she buys a lot,” said Mildred, laughing. In fact, about half of the boxes the women packed last year came from Andrea.

The women wrap the bottom and lid of each shoebox separately before filling each with 10 to 12 items. When finished, the boxes are delivered to a central location in Decatur, where they are collected to be forwarded to the Billy Graham Association. There, booklets about why Christians celebrate Christmas are added and the boxes are distributed throughout the world.

In the past, the three women had no idea where the boxes were sent, though Pat's son, who does missionary work in Cambodia, reported seeing some there. This year they will be able to track them on the Internet. But even when they don't know who receives their gifts, the three women have fun packing the boxes and imagining the children who receive them. "You can almost feel the joy of the little children," said Juetta.

At Imboden Creek Gardens, the same sentiment is displayed when a sleigh arrives in the foyer about the first of December. Eventually it is filled with donations of canned goods and boxed food destined for the Northeast Community Fund.

But the festivities there start right after Thanksgiving when the staff, with copious advice from residents—starts decorating with a two-story Christmas tree in the downstairs living room and garland hung from the balcony rail. "Mostly, they tell us to be careful," said Cami Franz, facility director.

Emmy Lampkin, 87, was pleased last year because the staff helped her decorate by hanging her Christmas stockings in her bay window. "I have 15 Christmas socks for my children and grandchildren," she said. "It made me feel like I was really home."

"It's like every child's dream of the North Pole," said Alice Creig, 83. "Every nook and cranny of Imboden Creek has some Christmas in it." Children of the staff and grandchildren of the residents get to enjoy all the nooks and crannies when they come to have lunch with Santa. Later, families join residents for a Christmas party. "One Christmas I had my son, his wife, and my granddaughter and her husband," said Alma Piekutowski, 85. "They enjoyed it, too."

Across the street, Imboden Creek Living Center has also become a "Christmas wonderland," said Molly Carpenter, administrator. "We have six trees. Each department decorates their own." Activities change based on the abilities of the residents. "Some of our residents are very independent," said Molly. "Some enjoy just the smells and tastes of Christmas."

Christmas, Molly noted, can be an emotionally difficult time, especially for the elderly. Some Imboden Creek residents have no families, and some have families that live too far away to visit often. The Living Center has a Christmas brunch for residents and their families and friends. Residents of both Imboden Creek facilities are guaranteed a guest at their Christmas parties. If no relatives or friends can attend, a staff member sits with them. And all the residents receive two gifts—one from the facility and one from staff.



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At Hickory Point Christian Village, the residents decorate the tree with suggestions from the staff. They do Christmas crafts—one year they made popcorn garlands. Sometimes they bake cookies in the oven in the activity room, and one year they even had a cookie exchange with recipes and samples.

Meanwhile, residents at Imboden Creek Gardens are busy rehearsing for a concert by the Golden Bells bell choir or for their annual Christmas play. “Last year we had very elegant actors on the stage,” said Emmy, explaining that when most of the actors got confused, they were set straight by a cast member who is blind—and who had apparently memorized everyone’s lines. “It brought the house down,” she remembered.

For some residents, the best memories are of field trips. Glenn Roberts, 91, says his favorite Christmas activity is going to the Live Nativity at St. John’s Lutheran Church. His daughter’s husband, Russell Wise, is pastor there, and Debbie makes sure they get a special tour. They get to go first, and they even get a narrator.

Haven House, a wing attached to Hickory Point Christian Village Assisted Living Center, is a residence for those who have memory loss. Residents often are able to remember joyous Christmases from childhood and youth better than recent celebrations. When they are asked questions about

gifts they received, how they decorated, or the foods they ate they will sometimes relate long and fascinating histories. They sing old, traditional carols and watch familiar and favorite movies like “It’s a Wonderful Life.”

Hickory Point Christian Village always has Christmas dinner the Tuesday before Christmas so the residents can enjoy having the special meal together without missing Christmas with their families.

Typically about half the residents of Imboden Creek Gardens go out on Christmas Day to be with their families. But some residents invite their families to have Christmas dinner there. They have all the traditional foods, and it’s so popular that residents must be limited to 10 guests each. Last year, said Cami Franz, Facility Director, more than 200 people came.

“It’s a magical time around here,” said Cami. “We try to make it special for everybody who walks into the building.” “Everybody is so happy,” said Alice. “it’s just a really good feeling. If you can’t be home for Christmas, then this is the best.”

Editor’s Note: LIVING Christian magazine encourages you and your family to spend some time at one of these loving facilities. Spending even just an hour or two can make a world of difference for someone this Christmas!

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