

One last act of kindness: James Gray helping kids before retiring from NAACP post

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - Alton NAACP President James Gray is taking a group of kids shoe shopping before he retires from his 26-year post.

Gray has taken local children from underprivileged families shopping for Christmas presents and new shoes every year for more than a decade. He took 46 children to

Target in Alton last Tuesday, Dec. 13, and gave each of them \$100 to spend on Christmas presents. He said his own background was his continuing motivation to give back to the community and ensure other families in need could have a good Christmas.

"It's something I'm really proud of," he said. "People have donated money to me for that for so many years. I didn't get anything for Christmas. My father left us eight kids with my mother, who had a second-grade education, which was nothing. I was next to the youngest, so I learned how to work young. I know how it feels with the parents I had to not have anything for Christmas. I didn't even go outside, because I didn't have anything."

Donations from the community have allowed Gray to continue to provide good Christmas gifts to these local children. On Saturday, Dec. 17, Gray will take kids to **Payless Shoe Store** and spend as much as \$1,100 in donations getting kids new shoes. He said he will serve as many kids as he possibly can as his last act in the position of **Alton NAACP** president, a position he has held for 26 years.

During his tenure as Alton NAACP president, Gray said he established the branch's first office and official telephone. Previous to his administration, the Alton NAACP president would have to operate using his own personal phone line. Gray said he also fought hard for civil rights and jobs for minorities while creating programs and initiatives to help local children.

Besides the Christmas gift and shoe shopping, Gray also started the Back to School, Stay in School initiative, which provided local students in need with a backpack full of school supplies. Gray was able to give away 1,000 backpacks to students in 2016 and feed them, using as much as \$27,000 in donations.

"I enjoy helping the less fortunate, because that is where I came from," he said. "I try to reach out to help the less fortunate. If I was rich, I would do a lot more. Fortunately, I have had a lot of people helping me throughout the years. Some of my greatest help has come from people like **John Simmons**."

Gray also took **Alton School District** students to **Memphis, Tennessee** to see the **National Civil Rights Museum**, built on the site of **Martin Luther King Jr.'s** assassination.

"Over the years I have been very successful in fighting for civil rights and getting minorities jobs," Gray said. "I am proud of my record I did out there with the kids."