

# Edwardsville woman, Community Hope Center, make Christmas brighter

by Dan Brannan, Content Director  
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Brandi Collman combs through different items for presents for her children at the Community Hope Center in Cottage Hills Christmas giveaway on Thursday. She said without the volunteers and donors of Community Hope Center, her children would not have Christmas this year.

For some area residents, Christmas is a lot brighter because of the Community Hope Center's annual toy and food giveaway, which started on Wednesday morning and runs to Friday.

The Christmas spirit was in the air this week at the center in Cottage Hills, with people there to pick out toys, clothes and food for the holidays. Volunteers smiled throughout the center, working diligently with those who received help from the center.

Denise Ukena of Edwardsville, assistant director of the facility and one of the event coordinators, stepped out of a teaching career to stay at home with her daughters and work at the Community Hope Center. She said she couldn't be happier helping others in need during the holiday season.

Since leaving her job as a teacher two years ago, she found that Christmas is a much different time than before without her income.

"It was a much, much different kind of Christmas than we had provided our daughters in the past," she said. My girls used to make a Christmas list page front and back and now I ask that they only request five or six items. Everything else they receive is icing on the cake. I found through this experience it is wonderful to have the support of my family."

The Edwardsville woman said it completely satisfies her to serve and help those in need this Christmas season with the toy and food giveaway.

"I have always had a heart for people and heart for service and this particular job taps into desires to serve I didn't even realize," she said. "I didn't realize how much this was what I wanted to do."

Paul Militzer, Community Hope Center executive director, beamed with pride about the work of his staff and volunteers for the Christmas program. He said Christmas would certainly be different for many in the River Bend area without the Community Hope Center, the volunteers and the boundless public donations.

Natalie Holliday of Alton was one who received some help for her children at the center on Wednesday and said she saw it as simply "an awesome blessing."

"I am just thankful for these loving people and the people of the area who contribute," Holliday said. "My son will be over excited for Christmas because of this today."

Todd Sorgea, a youth minister at First Christian Church at Wood River. He always volunteers to be the last in line for those who receive their items and said he is always moved by not only what the clients are able to receive, but seeing what the community can give and the quality of merchandise.

“I can’t imagine what Christmas would be without the toy giveaway and the three days’ blessing for the 400 families,” he said. “On Christmas Day, I will think of how blessed I am by God and the ability I have to give to others. This sets the tone for Christmas.”

Brandi Collman of Cottage Hills called the toy and food giveaway “a miracle” for her family.

“I have had a really bad year,” she said. “I was thinking about how Jesus blessed me with this place being in my backyard in Cottage Hills, not only with food, clothing and school supplies. I wish I could thank all the people in person who helped us. This is the only way my children would have Christmas.”