



FAIR PARK

Charity event 'a blessing' for families

13th annual Christmas in the Park offers toys, bikes, clothes, books

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When Anthony Brent arrived at Fair Park's Automobile Building Friday evening to try to sign up for the Christmas in the Park charity giveaway, the facility was already closed. Without enough gas money to return to Wilmer and come back Saturday morning for the annual event, Brent and his daughter and

his four nieces and nephews spent the night at the fairgrounds.

"It's been cold and frustrating," said Brent, 37. "But being able to get the kids Christmas gifts and toys has been a blessing."

The 13th annual Christmas in the Park at the Automobile Building provided thousands of southern Dallas families with toys, bicycles, clothes, books, shoes and household items. The event is put on by the S.M. Wright Foundation, a nonprofit that

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Shawana Bynum, 17 (left), with the Victory in Praise dancers from the People's Baptist Church, gave a hug to another dancer before they took the stage Saturday.

Monica Reeder/Staff Photographer



With her new bicycle at her side, Mia Sarahi, 5, found a quiet spot to leaf through her new story book at the 13th annual Christmas in the Park on Saturday morning at the Automobile Building in Fair Park.

Monica Reeder/Staff Photographer

Families get a boost at Fair Park event

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provided social service support.

S.M. Wright II, president and chief executive of the foundation, said the nonprofit began in 1998 and was named after his father, the Rev. S.M. Wright Sr., a civic leader who lost his battle to cancer and died in 1994.

"My family had a heart for South Dallas. It's our home," the younger Wright said.

Just 10 years ago, he said, Christmas in the Park served only 100 children. The sanctuary of People's Ministry Baptist Church in South Dallas was turned into a toy land for the program, and every year the event grew, he said. Four years ago, the event moved to Fair Park.

In addition to being provided toys, clothes and other goods, recipients were given a

warm meal from Williams Chicken before heading home Saturday.

"Our goal is to bring hope and stability to families raising children here — and not only through Christmas, but throughout the year," Wright said.

Christine Cook, president and chief executive of Carrollton-based Sleep Experts, said her goal is right in line with Wright's, and that's why her company is involved with Christmas in the Park.

"We couldn't believe the need for beds," Cook said. "There are many children sleeping on floors in South Dallas, and so many times we forget that families in need don't have simple necessities."

Sleep Experts donated 200 twin bed sets for the event.

"We want to help in a small way by sharing the gift of sleep," Cook said. "I think the

feeling of gratitude, for moms to be able to provide comfort and stability for their children, is rewarding."

Gina Betts has been involved with Christmas in the Park for 11 years, and she organizes the most popular aspect of the charity event: the bicycle department. Three years ago the foundation gave away 300 bicycles, she said. This year, 1,000 children will receive bicycles.

"By 1 p.m. [Saturday] we will be out of bikes," she said. "We think of bikes as a toy, but they think of it as a means of transportation. I had a 16-year-old boy tell me that now he will be able to get a job after school, and a mother said her children won't have to ride the bus anymore."

Ray Washburne, owner of Highland Park Village and Mi Cocina restaurants, has been involved with Christmas in the

Park for 10 years. He said the event grows larger and larger each year.

"Our heart was in it because of all the people of South Dallas, and S.M. Wright is doing great things for South Dallas," Washburne said. "We want to give back to our community, and this event gives people awareness of the needs down here."

Brent, who has been unemployed for four months, said it was worth the wait to see the smiles on his children's faces. His nieces and nephews each received a new Huffy bicycle, gifts that would not have been possible without Christmas in the Park, he said.

"It amazes me that there are people out there that care so much about the youth in our communities," Brent said. "It's great because we didn't have anything like this when I was growing up."