



Emmet County News Release

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Emmet County Fundraiser Shows 'WeCare' *Annual Event Raises Nearly \$1600 to Boost Fund That Helps Those in Need*

"It started out with some bunk beds," said Maurine Watts. "And, then we decided we needed to get these kids some Christmas presents too."

When three terribly abused small children were removed from their parents' custody about this time of year in 1989, Emmet County Probate Court employees Jennifer Swenor and Watts were so moved by the horror the kids had gone through, and the sudden predicament of the foster family who agreed to step up to help, that the two women decided they had to do something.

After getting a local store to donate bunk beds, Watts and Swenor knew the foster family did not have the money to do much more. Watts, who now heads the county's Friend of the Court, was Juvenile Officer at the time and Swenor was the in-home care worker in what was a small department. Though they had seen many disheartening cases, this particular situation drew widespread news coverage. It also happened at time when domestic and child abuse were taboo subjects to discuss in public and before there were organizations well-established to help victims. The few groups that did provide assistance to those in need, especially during the holiday season, had already dispersed their funds for the year.

So the two women walked around asking fellow employees to chip in so some Christmas presents could be purchased for the kids and the family that took them in.

Later, employees wondered if there were others they could help and, every year since, those working inside the Emmet County government building keep the fund going. Though it started with employees contributing what they could, it has blossomed into quite a big event that is now called "WeCare Fundraiser" as the money raised is distributed as needed year-round to show that county employees care.

This year, Emmet County employees raised \$1596.50 from their Nov. 29 event that included a somewhat-silent auction, a bake sale and a pizza luncheon. County employees donated items large and small for the auction then, on the day of the fundraiser, browsed the selections which filled up the county commissioners' board room. Some donated homemade bake goods that were happily purchased by other employees. Following the auction, they had pizza delivered and sold it by the slice.

The county building employees also receive a big boost from area businesses. This year, Calcie Lucier, a security official at the building's front desk, rounded up some impressive donations including gift certificates and other items from Grondins, Johan's Pastry Shop, Kilwins Chocolate Kitchen, Mountain Man Nut & Fruit Co., Plath's Meats, Polly's Planting & Plucking, Roast and Toast Cafe, Trillium Salon & Spa, Ugly Anne Boat Cruises, Willson's Garden Center and Yoga Roots & Healing Arts.

“Calcie did a phenomenal job getting donations from local businesses,” said Chief Deputy Treasurer Mary Mitchell, who has been participating and helping to organize the annual event for 15 years.

Mitchell explained that a committee headed by the elected officials and their staff in the offices of the county clerk, county treasurer and county register of deeds meet on an as-needed basis to decide when to distribute funds. In addition to the “WeCare” annual event, the fund is also supplemented throughout the year with “jean money” or the one dollar an employee contributes to wear jeans each Friday. They also accept donations from the public or businesses that wish to help increase their ability to help others.

The “WeCare” fund has helped in many different ways from buying glasses for a student, paying for a spouse to stay at a hotel for a couple of nights while his wife was undergoing medical treatment, purchasing items when a family suffered a house fire and so much more.

Mitchell said since the money is raised by employees, they will help their own when a situation arises.

Not long ago, Watts experienced the other side of the “WeCare” effort when someone in her own family was hospitalized unexpectedly. She choked back tears as she recalled how the employees sent her a gift certificate to help during that difficult time in her life.

“I’ve been on both sides now so I know what this means,” Watts said. “I’ve been on the giving side, but I’ve also been on the receiving side and know how special that feels.”

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