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Kid to kid: Plum pupils pack gifts for El Salvador

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By Nicholas Tolomeo, Tri-State Sports & News Service

There is not much that orphan kids from El Salvador and 5- and 6-year-olds from Plum have in common, except maybe knowing what they want for Christmas.

Earlier this month, when Mark Pupilli prepared to make his second trip to El Salvador to distribute shoeboxes full of gifts to orphans, his wife, Carol, consulted some people who might know a thing or two about what kids want for Christmas.

She went to Holiday Park Elementary School in Plum, where her son, Luke, is enrolled in kindergarten. She approached Luke's teacher, Sharon Stotler-McGraw, with the idea of collecting boxes and gifts for kids in El Salvador's orphanages.

"When people pack the boxes, I say get kids. They are experts and they know what to put in them," said Tim Blanarik formerly of Baden, Beaver County. He first persuaded Mr. Pupilli to travel to El Salvador with him in December 2006.

Mr. Blanarik and his wife, Debra, live in Hampton Roads, Va. He founded REACH Ministries -- Reaching & Equipping All Children for Him -- in 1993. It is a interdenominational, nonprofit organization.

The Blanariks have been ministering to children and training those who work with children for nearly two decades. They have served in the United States, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Brunei, Kenya, Laos, Honduras, Zimbabwe, Kenya and El Salvador.

"These little kids pack the boxes with so much love and care, and they pack these boxes to the brim," said Mr. Blanarik, an Ambridge High School graduate. "They have rubber bands around them. They're ready to burst and you can't put anything else in them."

The Holiday Park pupils, along with Ms. Stotler-McGraw and school Principal Margaret Evans, were more than happy to help the kids thousands of miles away on the western coast of Central America.

"We told Sharon what we were doing and if she would like to get involved. She said it sounded like a fantastic idea for a class project," Mrs. Pupilli said.

"She promoted it to the kids and they brought toys in, and I went in one day and the kids were filling and decorating boxes. They were just phenomenal."

The students in Plum took care of decorating and filling the boxes and it was Mr. Pupilli, 50, and Mr. Blanarik who made the flight to El Salvador to distribute them.

Mr. Blanarik has been making trips to impoverished countries since 1992 and he met Mr. Pupilli through a mutual friend and fellow missionary, Mark Geppert.

Mr. Geppert, currently working out of Oakmont, helped found the South East Asia Prayer Center in 1991.

It was at Mr. Geppert's son's wedding around Labor Day 2006 that Mr. Blanarik convinced Mr. Pupilli to make the trip. Seated at the same table at the reception at Heinz Field, Mr. Blanarik was talking about the trip and what he does.

"Mark says, 'You know what? I need to do that,' and I said, 'You're right, you do,' " Mrs. Pupilli recalled.

Mr. Pupilli was a standout running back at Plum High School in the 1970s and ended up playing at West Virginia University. He owns two businesses: Custom Modular Homes, in which he sells custom homes on the Internet, and Offprice Inc., in which he does jewelry and gift shows.

He said he got a firsthand look at the corruption in El Salvador on his first trip as he and other volunteers tried to get the shoeboxes out of customs and to the orphanages.

"You got to be flexible and maneuver. It's like playing defensive back; you never know what the quarterback -- in this case, the government people -- [will] do. We just adjust," said Mr. Pupilli.

"It's a Third-World country and the customs people want their cut and everyone has their hand out. It's a little more of a sacrifice."

After the difficulties on the first trip, Mr. Pupilli was hesitant to return this past year when Mr. Blanarik visited him at his home. He offered to just give him money to help the cause, but Mr. Blanarik persuaded him to make a second trip.

"I told him money can't replace you, and your money doesn't engage people, you do," Mr. Blanarik said. "He just brings life to the people and the workers down there. He is a big, jovial guy and he has such a big heart for the destitute children."

Both trips that Mr. Pupilli and Mr. Blanarik took lasted about five days. They typically wake up at 5 a.m. every day and load pickup trucks with the shoeboxes and drive about two hours into the countryside to distribute the gifts.

"The trips are rewarding, but also eye-opening. They love it when I tell them children in the U.S. pack these boxes," said Mr. Pupilli who has spent his past two birthdays in El Salvador.

"I go down there with the expectation of what I can do for them, and every time I come back, it's like I get more out of it than what I put into it. I can never give enough, you always get more back."

One of the orphanages they visit is for children with AIDS. Mr. Pupilli and Mr. Blanarik spend time with the children at the orphanages and in the villages, giving them what, in most cases, would be their only Christmas gifts.

They even drive out into the less safe areas of the town at night and give clothing to people sleeping in the street.

On the last day of the trip, the children come to an all-day event that ends with them lining up to receive shoeboxes filled with toys. Mr. Blanarik, Mr. Pupilli and other volunteers distribute them to a line stretching up to 300 yards.

"When we do the big outreach, I get up on stage and tell the kids some of the boxes were packed by kids in America," Mr. Blanarik said. "We make the kids aware there are people and kids in America that love you."

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