

Songs in their hearts

Kids, Christmas carols lift Alzheimer's patients' spirits in North Naples



Children from the Gargiulo Education Center in North Naples sing Christmas carols to residents of nearby Juniper Village on Friday, Dec. 14, 2018. (Photo: Alex Driehaus/Naples Daily News)

Children wearing scarves of tinsel and those red Santa hats we all know and love sipped their hot cocoa with marshmallows and nibbled their cookies as Mrs. Claus finished her second story of the afternoon. ■ First, there was applause. Next, presents. ■ Then, caroling. ■ About 40 students from the Gargiulo Education Center in North Naples visited Alzheimer's patients and sang Christmas songs Friday at nearby Juniper Village, a memory care facility for people struggling with Alzheimer's disease and other memory disorders.

Carols

When the children began to sing, some residents chimed in, singing jolly tunes such as "Jingle Bells" and "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" along with the kids "When the children come, the residents light up and it's like they're taken into this different world," said Donna Silva, activities director at Juniper Village. "They light up, and everything just stops. The focus is on the kids."

The Gargiulo Education Center is a nonprofit after-school support center for migrant and at-risk students. Most of the approximately 60 students have parents who work for Gargiulo Inc., a produce company based in Southwest Florida.

Mary Asta, executive director for the Gargiulo Education Center, wants the students to develop compassion and share it with people.

"It's good to know that other people suffer, that there are various diseases, and if somebody isn't acting in a certain way, there's probably a good reason for it," Asta said.

The children started their visit to Juniper Village by meeting Mrs. Claus, drinking hot chocolate and eating homemade cookies while Mrs. Claus read two stories: Dr. Seuss's "How the Grinch Stole Christmas!" and "Pashmina the Little Christmas Goat."

Then they were treated to presents from Mrs. Claus, who was actually Diana Chagnon, who owns her own business, The Mobile Reader. She delights in the children's excitement when they get their books — the neatly wrapped presents.

"I love encouraging reading," Chagnon said. "I wake up every day excited about going to work."



Residents clap along as children from the Gargiulo Education Center in North Naples sing "Feliz Navidad" at Juniper Village on Friday. (Photo: Alex Driehaus/Naples Daily News)

The kids seemed to delight in the festivities, too.

Seven-year-old Victor DeLeon-Jose's favorite song to sing in the set was "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," and he liked the story about the Christmas goat.

"It was about a man who found a little lamb" and saved it, Victor said.

For Christmas, he said he wants not just one shoe, but two; he's growing out of his current pair and he'd like the red ones, if you please.

Even before Mrs. Claus announced that the presents were books, he could tell what it was, and he said he was pretty excited about it.

Eliza Martinez, 8, also preferred "Rudolph" to the other Christmas songs but liked the story about the Grinch more than the goat. For Christmas, she wants a rainbow-colored slide that is 20 feet tall, but she wouldn't be scared, she'll have you know.

When Mrs. Claus had finished her part of the talk, Silva explained to the students what she did as activities director, gave the students an idea of how they could have a job like hers one day and answered any questions the students had.

Asta often involves the students in experiential learning opportunities.

"We try very, very hard to expose them to the real world, because where they live, they're kind of like in a bubble and they don't know anything besides their parents working in the field or in the plants," Asta said. "We expose them to as many opportunities as possible."

Those might include etiquette lessons for the students at a country club or, as in their visit to Juniper Village, what memory care is for and what it might look like.

But then it was time for caroling. As 7-year-old Victor said: "Let's go!"