‘Elves’ spread holiday joy through special deliveries to Akron youth

It was a quiet Sunday morning in December when a parade of fire trucks, police cars and semi-trailers suddenly appeared in a small Akron neighborhood blasting their horns.

Children and parents alike came running out of their houses, shouting with excitement when they saw the source of the commotion: Dozens of volunteers were unloading eight enormous trucks filled to the brim with brand new bicycles. Christmas had come a few days early.

Each year, Elves & More of Northeast Ohio chooses a struggling neighborhood in Greater Akron to surprise with 500 new bicycles, just in time for the holidays.

“We deliver hope and joy at Christmas-time to kids who may not otherwise have it,” said Tim House, who co-founded Elves & More after being inspired by a similar program in Houston, Texas.

Leaders at the nonprofit consult with local police departments and drive through potential delivery sites – often counting the number of boarded-up houses – before deciding which neighborhood will receive bikes that year. Past recipients have included children in the North Hill, Lane Field and Summit Lake neighborhoods.

“We try to find an area in need that we have enough bikes to fill,” House said.

Museum spotlights budding artists

As an internationally acclaimed museum, the Akron Art Museum is famous for its massive collection of art created by virtuosos like Norman Rockwell and Cindy Sherman. But six times a year, the museum showcases special pieces of art created by a different kind of artist: local children.

As part of the Night at the Museum program, which is supported by the Millennium Fund for Children, the Akron Art Museum hosts one-night-only exhibitions in its grand lobby to display the artwork of young students who have previously visited the museum on school tours. After touring the museum and being inspired by its many art galleries, students create their own masterpieces in the classroom.

The Night at the Museum program then brings the experience full circle by giving kids and their families the chance to see their own creations in a museum setting.
Grants totaling $46,578 support children’s programs

In 2015, the Millennium Fund awarded grants totaling $46,578 to 32 nonprofits, bringing its cumulative grant-making total to $623,922. The following grants were awarded this year:

**ACCESS Inc.**, to provide meals, health assessments, clothing and school supplies for children living at the shelter, $2,000

**Akron Area YMCA**, to purchase an inflatable water challenge activity for children at Camp Y-Noah, $1,000

**Akron Art Museum**, to support the Night at the Museum program, $1,000

**Akron Rotary Camp for Children with Special Needs**, to replace worn buoys and swim lines for the recreational swimming program, $1,900

**Art Sparks**, for the Fabulous Fitness dance program for second- and third-graders in Akron Public Schools, $1,200

**Battered Women’s Shelter**, to provide enrichment opportunities and field trips for children living at the shelter, $1,000

**Birthcare of Medina County**, to provide winter pajamas and blankets for infants and toddlers in need, $1,900

**Bright Star Books Inc.**, to provide books to young children who are enrolled in area WIC clinics, $2,000

**Building for Tomorrow**, to support family outreach events for low-income families in Twinsburg, $1,000

**Caring for Kids Inc.**, to purchase holiday and birthday gifts for children in foster care, $1,000

**CASA Board Volunteer Association Inc.**, for a holiday party at the Akron Zoo for children in foster care, $1,000

**Center for Applied Theatre and Active Culture**, to support art-based social events for children with autism, $1,000

**Children’s Concert Society of Akron**, to help children from low-income families attend the Concert Hall Series, $1,500

**Christ Child Society of Akron**, to provide essential newborn items and child safety literature to mothers of at-risk babies, $1,000

**Crown Point Ecology Center**, to introduce low-income children to organic farming and gardening through the 2016 Summer Farm & Science Camp, $2,000

**Dancing Classrooms Northeast Ohio**, for a ballroom dance residency program that fosters respect, teamwork and self-esteem among Akron Public Schools students, $1,000

**Elves & More of Northeast Ohio**, to purchase bicycles for children in low-income neighborhoods, $1,000

**Embracing Futures Inc.**, to teach third-graders about the benefits of oral health, $1,000

**Family Promise of Summit County Inc.**, to provide car seats, diapers and wipes for babies in homeless families, $2,000

**Girls on the Run Northeast Ohio**, to provide nutritious snacks, $2,000

**Good Neighbors Inc.**, to purchase uniforms for needy students, $2,000

**GriefCare Place Inc.**, for grief camps and school-based grief counseling groups for children and teens, $1,000

**Leggett Community Learning Center, Akron Public Schools**, to support the Leader in Me program, which helps increase attendance and test scores by teaching students about respect and personal responsibility, $1,000

**Magical Theatre Company**, for theater productions and drama workshops for homeless children, $2,000

**OPEN M**, for an early childhood education program that prepares children from low-income families for kindergarten, $2,000

**OutSupport Inc.**, for support services for transgender youth, $1,500

**Portage-Summit Diaper Bank**, to buy diapers for families in need, $2,000

**Rape Crisis Center**, for the Tina Project, which helps prevent teen dating violence by teaching students about healthy relationships, $2,000

**Shelter Care Inc.**, to support recreational activities for at-risk youth in the respite care program, $1,778

**South Street Ministries**, to support an art therapy mentoring program for teen girls in the Summit Lake neighborhood, $2,000

**Victim Assistance Program Inc.**, for the “Kids Need a Firm Foundation” picnic for children who have witnessed or been victims of violence, $1,500

**Weatherwane Community Playhouse Inc.**, to provide theater class scholarships to children from low-income families, $1,200

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**Ways you can give**

**Stock transfers:** Gifts of stock offer a two-fold tax savings by allowing you to avoid paying capital gains while giving you an income tax deduction for the full fair market value of your stock. We recommend initiating transfers by Dec. 22 to ensure they are completed by the end of the 2015 tax year. Get detailed instructions at www.akroncf.org/stocktransfers.

**Cash:** Last-minute gifts of cash to the Millennium Fund can be made online through midnight on Dec. 31 at www.akroncf.org/give/Millennium.

Learn more about all the ways you can give at www.akroncf.org/smartgiving.
Taylor Wessels served as a youth representative on the Millennium Fund’s grant committee from 1999 to 2005. Now married and living in Cincinnati, Taylor reflects on the lessons he learned about philanthropy as a teen:

Ever since I was old enough to get an allowance, my parents taught me to donate 10 percent of what I have to a worthwhile cause. After the Akron Beacon Journal wrote an article about this practice, I was invited to serve on the grant committee of the Millennium Fund. In between cello recitals, trips to Swenson’s, and studying for the SATs, I got an amazing chance to make a positive contribution to the lives of my fellow kids in Akron. I like to think that I gave the Millennium Fund as much as it gave me, but I took away some invaluable lessons from my time on the grant committee.

Every spring, a sheaf of up to 100 grant applications arrived at my home for review prior to the annual meeting of the grant committee. My parents offered indispensable advice and, with experience, I learned to evaluate applications with an analytical eye. The applications didn’t all use the polished language of a professional grant writer; some of them weren’t even typed. A list of requests written in neat cursive, or hand-fed through an electric typewriter, betrayed both the vulnerability and the pride of the applicants. I knew these people trusted me with something vitally important to them, even though I was a teenager. I learned quickly that every application represented people, not just numbers.

Working with the Millennium Fund grant committee was a master class in group decision-making. Each member of the committee – made up of educators, community organizers, business leaders and others – brought something different to the table. I watched these leaders make persuasive arguments and, when necessary, demonstrate flexibility and willingness to seek consensus. This was not mock trial or debate team; I got to participate in real-world decisions under the mentorship of some truly generous community leaders.

The Millennium Fund’s original focus on small gifts cultivated a belief that I still hold today: Philanthropy is for everyone. Before there was Kickstarter or donations via text message, there were people mailing $10 bills to the Millennium Fund. Akron Community Foundation stewarded those tiny droplets of funding into a massive reservoir of giving that will benefit Akron’s children for generations. I learned that you didn’t have to be a Polsky or a Seiberling to have a lifelong impact on Akron through generosity.

Taylor and his wife, Kaitlyn, share a passion for philanthropy.

Today, I am married to a social worker who shares my passion for giving. With so many worthy causes, we focus our time and financial gifts on a few organizations that are meaningful to us. Although I now live in Cincinnati, I still send a regular gift back home to the Millennium Fund every year. It’s the least I can do for the organization that taught me, at an early age, the joy of giving.

Elves & More brightens the holiday season for local families.

Bicycles, cont. from page 1

Centerville, Ohio. Older kids receive BMX and beach cruiser-style bicycles, while younger kids get Radio Flyer tricycles or bikes with training wheels. All of the bicycles are assembled in a single morning in what has become a holiday tradition for many of the volunteers.

“We have people lined up waiting to help us build bikes,” House said. “One year, a guy came up to me and said, ‘I want to thank you for giving me a reason to celebrate Christmas again.’”

Many of the volunteers are involved in the process from beginning to end: They donate, build and then personally deliver their bicycles to children in need, many times in lieu of holding their own holiday celebration. It’s a tradition that brings deep satisfaction, said House, one that is outweighed only by the joy of the children they serve.

“When the kids see the fire engines and hear the horns, they start running,” House said. “They’re super excited.”

But the biggest thanks often comes from the children’s parents and grandparents, who are overwhelmed by the generosity of strangers.

“We’ll have a grandma who is raising her grandchildren come up sobbing and tell us how thankful she is because she couldn’t afford Christmas this year,” House said. “Those are the moments that keep us coming back.”

Elves & More brightens the holiday season for local families.
Art, cont. from page 1

“Students can give their families a tour of the exhibition based on the docent-led tour they received on their field trip,” said Alison Caplan, the museum’s director of education. “It really builds their self-confidence and helps families see the museum in a new light.”

The exhibitions are held on Free Thursdays, which allows nearly 1,000 families throughout the year to experience the museum’s programming at no cost in an unintimidating, welcoming environment.

“One of our priorities is to reach out and include those people who wouldn’t normally think of themselves as the museum-going type,” said development officer Eliza Williams. “It breaks down the barriers that people have and makes this an accessible place. That is a beautiful thing.”

In addition, the program helps reinforce the concepts students are learning in the classroom, including math. Caplan said many of the schools’ art and math teachers team up to demonstrate important skills like geometry through art.

“It teaches those concepts in an accessible way,” Caplan said, adding that it also fosters creativity. “There is a real connection between art experience at an early age and creativity later in life. We really want to promote that.”

Perhaps one of the biggest benefits of the Night at the Museum program is the confidence boost it gives to budding artists. Aretha Valentin, outreach coordinator and club director for the Boys and Girls Clubs of the Western Reserve, said she’s seen firsthand how participating in this program has positively influenced the kids in her clubs.

“Our kids usually do their artwork and take it home. Some families may hang it up, but many times (they don’t),” Valentin said. “By having their work displayed in an art museum, it gives them pride in the work they’ve done. It makes them feel good.”

She said the program is especially beneficial for kids who dream of becoming an artist themselves.

“For our members who are really passionate about art, I believe this lets them see what it would be like for their artwork to be hanging in a museum one day,” she said. “It builds their self-esteem and encourages them to keep going if art is what their passion is.”