

Wish Book: Readers grant holiday wishes for needy South Florida families

HIGHLIGHTS

Nearly \$300,000 donated to the Miami Herald's Wish Book families, serving about 200 families

Families receive electronics, clothing, furniture

Wish Book, in its 34th year, partnered with Miami Heat player Dwyane Wade's charity to help three families



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The moment Maria Perez read the inspiring account of Wildine Aumoithe, she added her name to her family's Christmas gift list. Same story for Leda L. Falero, a retired teacher who was moved by "this incredible young lady."

Though brimming with smarts and confidence and personality, Wildine is slowed by a rare genetic condition that causes dwarfism. Doctors did not expect her to survive Achondroplasia, discovered during a prenatal exam of her mother. Now, Wildine is about 30 inches tall, a height that has immeasurably changed her world — but not her shining outlook.

For Christmas, she asked for a laptop, one light enough to tote herself, and a printer.

Through the Miami Herald's Wish Book program, an enduring community effort built upon the power of generosity, Wildine received both from Falero and Perez. Just before the holiday, Wildine sat near a Christmas tree and accepted gifts and well wishes at the Mailman Center for Child Development at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine. Falero gave Wildine a MacBook Air. Perez and her son Michael, who had met Wildine when he volunteered at the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind summer camp, purchased the printer.

"I saw the story on the front page of the paper and I recognized her picture. She is the sweetest little girl ever and her family is very nice," said Perez, a Miami-Dade elementary school teacher. "Even with her disability, she is happy. We just wanted to pay it forward."

This holiday season, the Herald published 33 Wish Book stories — along with 15 featured in El Nuevo Herald — all meant to open the hearts and purses of the South Florida community through portraits of those in need. The stories were posted online and in print, part of a campaign that included featuring some of the nominees' stories at Aventura Mall.

The mission: Fulfill wishes across Miami-Dade and Broward counties. Readers responded, graciously contributing \$296,337 in cash, plus another \$122,000 in goods and services and about \$50,000 in pending pledges.

For the 198 families served by Wish Book, it made a huge difference. About two weeks after Christmas, the Miami Herald received a letter from a mother who was given gift cards that allowed her to purchase food, clothing and holiday gifts.

“She wrote, ‘I just want to thank you. This transformed us. The children were so happy, we were able to have toys under the trees, we were able to have a tree,’ ” said Alexandra Villoch, president and publisher of the Miami Herald Media Co. “It’s not necessarily the amount of money, but creating a moment of happiness. This mother’s words really touched my heart because from the generosity of our readers, we were able to make an impact.”

But beyond the laptops and bicycles, the dolls and clothing, Wish Book offered the kind of responses that change lives: A 47-year-old Miami Beach stroke victim will receive modifications made to her apartment. A 19-year-old Miami teen whose father became ill and lost his job received a full scholarship to Miami Dade College and Florida International University. A 31-year-old Lauderhill mother of three fighting breast cancer received new beds for her children. And a 24-year old Homestead woman with cystic fibrosis now has portable oxygen tanks.

Last year’s cash total was \$415,084.91. Donations of cash and in-kind services are accepted throughout the year. Managed by Miami Herald Charities, the 2015 series marks the 34th year of the Herald’s involvement.

“It looks like we are approaching our highest year ever,” said Wish Book coordinator Roberta DiPietro.

The Wish Book program also partnered with Miami Heat player Dwyane Wade’s charity, the Wade’s World Foundation, The Collection and Global Furniture to give three families new furniture, toys, electronics and tickets to a Heat game. And the Miami Foundation’s Miami Give Day generated \$15,423 in contributions as part of the total.

“The power of Wish Book is that we are telling the stories of our neighbors,” said Aminda Marqués Gonzalez, the Miami Herald’s executive editor. “You can talk about issues, but unless you connect with people in a personal way, it does not always resonate. Our readers are really empathetic and give even when they don’t always have to give.”

El Nuevo executive editor Myriam Marquez said she was most inspired by the stories about families who, despite challenges, were doing their best improve the lives of their children.

“There was the Sosa family who came from Cuba through a treacherous trip on land from Ecuador through Central America until crossing the Mexico-U.S. border. It was their first Christmas in Miami, and they had absolutely nothing,” Marquez said. “Little Lisa Garcia, only 4 years old, was born with a rare disease that keeps her in a fixed position physically, but she has a wonderful spirit, and now she will be getting an electric wheelchair.”

For Wildine, the gifts were the perfect way to begin school after the holiday break.

“I had a good Christmas. I had wanted the laptop and printer for school. This going to be a big help for my homework and research,” she said. “I am really grateful.”

For others, the gifts helped to usher in a new chapter.

After Gabrielle Joseph, 18, aged out of foster care, she moved into a one-bedroom apartment. She had a donated bed and sofa and not much else. Wish Book changed that, delivering her a new bed, dresser, desk and a sweet note from a donor.

“My apartment is small and I didn’t have much,” said Joseph, who graduated high school and is now studying cosmetology in Hollywood. “With the new items, I can make my house feel homey.”

Just before Thanksgiving, readers met Andromaque Thomas and her 6-year-old autistic twins, Ricky and Rocky. Thomas struggles to care for the boys and two older children. She is a single mother working towards her GED. The identical twins were diagnosed at 2 years old, but do not speak and are not potty-trained. They need speech, occupational and recreational therapy. The family received a computer, gift cards, clothing and will have the costs of therapies supplemented by the Wish Book program.

And a special gift for Ricky and Rocky after one Kendall man read their story — and his childhood memories from decades before came rushing back.

“When I was a kid, I suffered with a learning disability. I had my struggles,” said Carlos Uz, owner of Fitness Sports Karate Inc., which provides recreational therapy and fitness for special needs children and adults. “I read about the boys and wanted to help them with fitness, something that would help with their coordination and motor skills.”

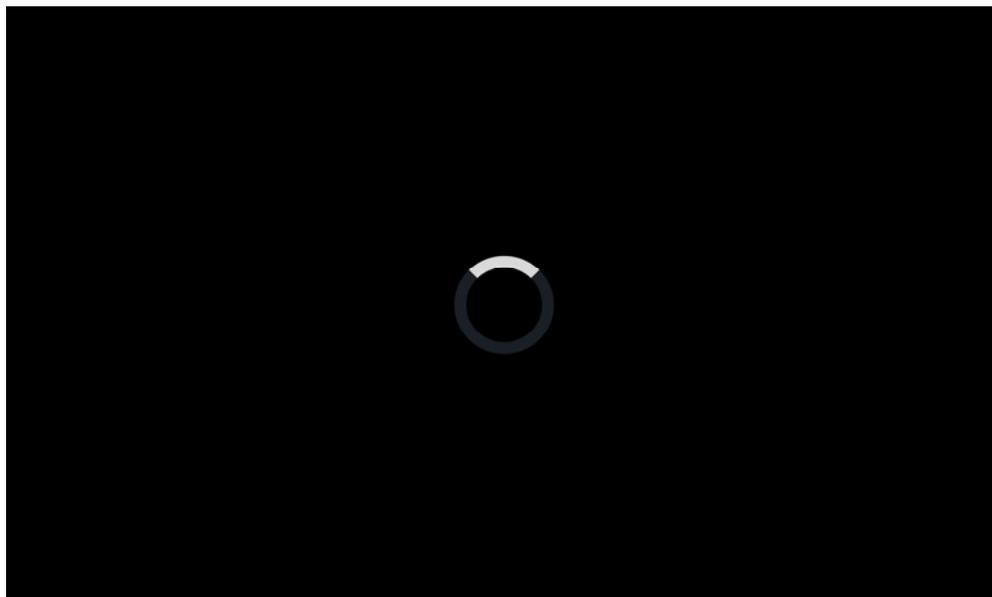
So on Saturdays, Uz makes the 20-mile drive to Homestead where he meets the identical twins and gives them free karate lessons. So far, they have received four sessions, with two more to go.

“The boys really enjoy themselves,” said Thomas, who also receives much-needed respite time. “They look forward to Saturdays. It makes them smile.”



MORE WISH BOOK

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