

Former Operation Christmas child recipients now giving

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Youth at
Broadway
Baptist
Church in
Fort
Worth put
together
packages
for
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Christmas
Child.

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By George Henson

Staff Writer

FORT WORTH—Most people who fill a shoebox with treats and trinkets for an orphan a world away can only guess of the happiness the [Operation Christmas Child](#) ministry brings. Four Fort Worth girls who once lived in Russian orphanages have a much keener understanding.

Now a part of Chris and Marla Morris' family and the youth group at [Broadway Baptist Church](#) in Fort Worth, the two sets of sisters have moved from being recipients of the shoeboxes to being on the giving side of ministry.

Toma and her biological sister, Lena, as well as their new sisters Natasha and Alyona, know just what they want to include in the boxes.



Toma and Lena have lived in the United States about two years, Natasha and Alyona, just over a year. They still remember the day a local pastor brought the boxes to their orphanages.

Toma also remembers the year she opened a box to find pencils, paper and erasers. While she was glad to have them, she also recalls being disappointed as she looked around the room and saw the toys other children pulled from their boxes.

"Be sure to put something fun in there," she counseled. "It wasn't that much fun to just get school supplies, especially when the other kids got candy and toys," she said honestly.

Still, "it was special because someone cared for me," she added.

"I pack really good stuff," Alonya added. "Things I wish I could have."

"Think of how they will feel," Natasha offered as advice for deciding what to include in a box.

“They should think of everything they have, and the orphans don’t have anything,” Toma added.

Marla Morris believes the girls’ experience of living in an orphanage has made them generous. “They are always looking to give to others,” she said.

Broadway Minister to Youth Fran Patterson wants to instill that same generosity and awareness in other members of the church’s youth group.

For 10 years, Broadway youth have supported the Samaritan’s Purse ministry Operation Christmas Child by preparing shoeboxes for orphans around the world.

“My kids just have so much, I just think it’s good for them to think of other kids who don’t have a hundredth of what they have,” Patterson said.

Three Wednesday nights are devoted to Operation Christmas Child. The first night, the youth watch a video from Samaritan’s Purse detailing the need and the opportunity for ministry. They also wrap their boxes that night with Christmas wrapping paper. The last thing they do the first evening is make a shopping list of what they would like to put in the box.

The next week, the youth go to discount stores to buy items they have chosen for their boxes. Patterson uses the money from the church’s vending machines and a little budget money, if needed, to provide about \$15 for items for each box.

Extra adults are needed for the shopping night, Patterson noted, but perennial volunteers for the evening keep the adult-to-student ratio adequate.

The third week, the youth pack the boxes, have their pictures taken with an instant camera to stick inside the box lid and write a letter about themselves that is packed in the box.

Patterson said the three weeks are some of the best attended of the year.

“Some of our kids who for one reason or another can’t be here on a regular basis, they insist on being here those three nights,” she said.

As special as the project may be for those providing the gifts, it cannot compare to the blessing for those on the receiving end, Mrs. Morris said. She has made trips with Buckner Orphan Care International to numerous orphanages, and a treat of any size is a huge encouragement, she noted.

“In many orphanages, the kids feel fortunate to even get a piece of candy for Christmas,” she said. “We know a lot of kids in orphanages, and everything they have in the world fits in a shoebox, and they guard it.”

Although many churches and individuals participate in the project, she said, many more participants are needed if every orphan is to be included. In Russia alone, there are more than 750,000 children living in orphanages.

Last year, the Broadway boxes found their way to Africa. Alyona was one of several youth who got letters from the orphans who received their boxes.

Victor told Alyona: “It was a very good day when I receive your Christmas gift. ... I enjoy myself from the day time till the evening.”

Others who want to join in the gift of giving can go to www.samaritanspurse.org for more information. The national collection date is Nov. 13-20, but boxes can be sent to the ministry offices year 'round.

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