

For Jarrett, service is a year-round, lifelong passion

By Katherine Dyer
City People Writer

Families involved with Greenville's Pleasant Valley Head Start Center will have even more reason to be merry this Christmas, thanks in part to the work of Elizabeth Jarrett.

Jarrett, director of service learning at Christ Church Episcopal School, is coordinating a program with the center that offers Christ Church families an opportunity to "adopt" a child for Christmas.

Participants from CCESI receive the name of a child and then bring enough presents to provide this child his or her own very special Christmas. Jarrett then delivers the wrapped gifts to the center, and Pleasant Valley Head Start distributes them to the parents to give to their children on Christmas.



Elizabeth Jarrett stands amidst pictures depicting her students out serving in the Greenville community. As CCES service director, Jarrett's goal is to turn her passion for service into a natural way of life for the school community. (KATHERINE DYER/Staff)

But Jarrett brushes aside her individual connection with the Christmas program, even as two very large and festive bundles of gifts sit expectantly next to her desk, awaiting delivery.

"I haven't solicited," she explains. "I just sent out one e-mail."

And from that single prompt, the school responded overwhelmingly, already adopting 100 children by Nov. 23. Some families chose to focus on a single child, while others coordinated their "adoptions" with the number of their own children or grandchildren, even buying for five Pleasant Valley children.

Service, Jarrett explains, is a value deeply rooted at CCES. She recalls that as a CCES student many years ago, she participated in a similar Christmas adoption program. It was an experience that, coupled with the example set by her own parents, helped ignite in her a passion for serving others.

But now, community service is not just a Christmastime project. It's Jarrett's focus year-round, and though she downplays her role, her efforts are shaping the perspective of the school.

In 2005, Jarrett became director of service learning after teaching for six years in the CCES lower school.

"I felt like my passion is in the community and helping people," she says. "I wanted to get my students

out of the classroom. (This job) was a way for me to combine my teaching and my love for the school with the community.”

Since then, she’s instituted set service projects for students in grades 2-8, incorporating cultural, environmental, educational and health-related opportunities that match each curriculum as closely as possible.

And for the first time this semester, high school students may take a special service learning elective taught by Jarrett. Three days each week, the students venture out to work in the community, and the class also hosts speakers who present information about the different organizations, opportunities and resources available in Greenville.

Jarrett says her goal has been to use a hands-on approach with students, sending them out of the school so that they might experience real needs instead of simply raising money.

“I really try to incorporate service as just a natural part of the school,” she says. “And not just community service, but service learning . We try to give them knowledge first, and then action and experience, so hopefully they can gain from that the compassion.”

If the “unsolicited” adoption of 100 children for Christmas is any sort of indicator, this compassion seems to have taken root.

“There are all kinds of ways to give – it doesn’t always have to be monetary,” Jarrett reiterates. “You can give of your time or of yourself – your ideas. I think everyone has to find their comfort level and then push themselves a little bit further.”