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## Mall customers buy birthday gifts for foster children

October 12, 2011 | CHRISTIANA LILLY [clilly@tribune.com](mailto:clilly@tribune.com)

For two weekends in September, shoppers passed by a table with a calendar of children's faces identifying their birthday. While some walked on by, many stopped to donate a gift card to the cause to make sure these children had a birthday present.

The new Wish Gallery was launched at the Westfield Broward mall and was a success, giving more than 40 children whose birthdays are through January not just one, but two presents.

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"We just wanted everybody to make sure they're remembered on their birthday," Barbara Schechter, executive director of Heart Gallery [Broward County](#), said.

The program is under the Heart Gallery of [Broward County](#), a traveling photography exhibit of about 100 of the county's foster children. Most are the ones that are harder to adopt because of their age. With the holidays coming up, many nonprofits conduct toy drives for Christmas and Hanukkah, but like other December babies, these children's birthdays can be overlooked.

"We didn't really know what to expect but we were just hoping we could cover the first three months of children...we made it to January," Schechter said.

At the mall, volunteers, shoppers and even a security guard went out of their way to buy a gift for a child they'd never met. The presents were dropped off at ChildNet, the county's child advocacy organization, where advocates could pick them up to give to the foster children. Also, foster parents were given a gift card to Publix Supermarkets where they can buy a cake.

"We don't have a birthday drive, so we're very excited that Barbara Schechter and the Heart Gallery came up with this. It's very helpful," Sasheika Eugent, community and public relations specialist for ChildNet, said.

A lot of the time, caseworkers will also pitch in to buy cupcakes and sometimes a conference room will get booked at ChildNet for a small birthday party.

"Depending on where they're living – if they're in a foster home or a group home – there's usually a small celebration but it's nothing too extreme like what you would get if you weren't in foster care," Aneysha James, an adoption advocate, said.

James recently presented 12-year-old Jerrell T. with two gift cards that were bought for him. It was an early birthday present, as he turns 13 in another week. Children like him are lucky because his foster family is able to buy him a gift every year for his birthday.

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"It's great because it's in addition to whatever the case worker can do for the kid or what the foster parents can do," Eugent said.

Reading the birthday card from a stranger together, Jerrell said that he would definitely been going to GameStop to use the gift cards.

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"He practically lives there," Mable Cooke, his foster mother, laughed.

Jerrell, like more than 1,000 kids in the county, are still waiting for a "forever family" to adopt them. He has been living with Cooke for 10 years now as her foster son. With the Heart Gallery, people are able to put a face and personality facts together. Malls are a great location to showcase the gallery, Schechter said, because of the high traffic through the stores. Up to 15 people might call the nonprofit in regards to volunteering, foster parenting or even adopting.

Now, with the new Wish Gallery, the children get a little extra attention with gifts from those in the community.

"[The children] are overlooked a lot of the time and it's good that other agencies are able to assist with making sure that children are able to have a sense of normalcy in their life," James said.

*To donate to the Wish Gallery, call 954-918-3008 or visit [HeartGalleryofBroward.org](http://HeartGalleryofBroward.org) and click on "donate." For more information about adopting or other foster children's birthdays, call ChildNet at 954-414-6000.*

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