

# LI SPORTS

## They Have Gift of Giving

Volunteers spread Christmas joy to needy kids on LI

By Gregg Sarra

STAFF WRITER

The anticipation was making him so anxious. Juan Garcia sat quietly in a corner of the Knights of Columbus hall in Bay Shore one night earlier this month and patiently waited for his name to be called. The 8-year-old, who came from Bay Shore's Rainbow Outreach, stared across the hall at Santa Claus in his red and white suit handing out gift after gift to all the jubilant children who were called up to see him.

And then it happened.

Holding a letter in his left hand, old St. Nick belted out the words Garcia had been waiting for — "Juan Garcia."

Without hesitation, and so quickly it was as if his feet didn't touch the floor, Garcia was sitting atop Santa's lap and smiling from ear to ear.

This is what Christmas Magic is all about — the joy of giving. Garcia opened his gift, a WWF championship wrestling belt, and leapt from Santa's lap exclaiming, "I am the champion. Yes, I am."

Garcia was one of 360 children at the K of C as Christmas Magic wound its way through Suffolk County, meeting the requests of needy children with the help of local high school athletes and coaches. This night the kids came from St. Patrick's Church Outreach Center, Suburban Housing and Rainbow Outreach.

"He [Garcia] was such a cute kid," said Charlie Russo, who founded Christmas Magic 15 years ago. "You could see the excitement just building in these kids when they wait for their name to be called. And when they come up and sit on our lap, their stories are heartbreaking. It's such a warm feeling to see them smile. It's great."

The smiles started at the Huntington Townhouse on Dec. 5 for children from the Department of Social Services of Suffolk. There were performances that night from the Rocky Point Singing Santas, and the smiles didn't end until the final stop in Wyandanch late Christmas Eve.

Christmas Magic has grown from a simple idea of reaching out to one homeless shelter 15 years ago to a full-time, year-round operation which raised more than \$150,000 this season.

To get on Santa's gift list, all it takes is a written letter to his office at the North Pole (9400 Townline Road, Hauppauge 11788) and the elves at Christmas Magic can make the wishes come true.

"We have so many people that are dedicated to our mission," said Russo, the chairman of the board at the Hope House Ministries. "The success of Christmas Magic lies in the recruitment of volunteers who handle everything from shopping for the gifts and



Newsday Photo / Alejandra Villa

Commack High School lacrosse player Michael Gongas and Santa Claus help 5-year-old Kenya Flowers open up her Christmas gift

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— *Commack lacrosse player Michael Gongas, on volunteering to help the needy*

wrapping the presents to the delivery at the different shelters."

Babylon High School football star Drew Peters was one of 10 All-Long Island athletes to support Christmas Magic. One night, Peters worked alongside Commack quarterback Mike Prahalis, Commack linebacker Clint Riggs, Smithtown quarterback Jon Zimmer (the National Football Foundation's top scholar-athlete for Suffolk) and Commack wideout Bryan Tornee.

They wrapped presents, loaded the delivery truck and helped set up a site in Brentwood.

"It changes your entire perspective on things," said Michael Gongas, Commack's star lacrosse player. "It's an opportunity to see how lucky you are and a chance to make others so happy. It's a fulfilling venture. I love to go... every night. Whenever I get the chance to help, I'm in."

One of Russo's favorite moments

this season came when fitness guru Jamie LaBelle earned his Santa suit at Pine Park.

"He graduated from elf status this year and got the opportunity to put on the suit and feel the emotion," Russo said. "I could see the tears in his eyes. He got to feel the warmth and see how the kids light up when they see him. He absolutely loved it."

Russo said others like Comsewogue football coach Fred Amodeo, St. Anthony's lacrosse player Matt LaBarbera, students from Comsewogue and St. Anthony's and Port Jefferson girls soccer coach Nancy Matura (who's been on board for 10 years) and all her players, are vital to the success of Christmas Magic.

"It all starts and ends with those people," Russo said. "And it's filled with all the smiles in between."

The Christmas Magic workshop begins in January for next year. Anyone interested in signing up as an elf or making a contribution can call 631-265-7200 and ask for Santa.

They'll be happy to hear from you.