

## CHRISTMAS GIFTS FOR ALL

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# cover story



Golden Gate resident Bernice Garcia smiles as a Christmas store volunteer finishes wrapping up her children's gifts at Grace Place for Children and Families on Dec. 19. "Grace Place helped after Hurricane Irma. We didn't have enough money left to spend on Christmas gifts," said Garcia. PHOTOS BY ASHLEY COLLINS/STAFF

# GRACE PLACE SHOWERS FAMILIES WITH GIFTS

**ASHLEY COLLINS**  
NAPLES DAILY NEWS  
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

Bernice Garcia browsed through stacks of board games and puzzles in search of the perfect Christmas gifts for her young children.

She settled on a Play-Doh set, two pajamas and the popular interactive game Hatchimals.

Those items were quickly wrapped in festive paper by volunteers working inside a makeshift Christmas store on Tuesday morning at Grace Place for Children and Families in Golden Gate.

"September and October were hard months," said Garcia.

The mother of two girls, ages 2 and 5, evacuated to Tennessee before Hurricane Irma struck Florida in September.

The storm brought down the fence and damaged the roof of her Golden Gate home. An outdoor shed housing all her Christmas decorations was destroyed.

"Now we're trying to get back to normal, but I still wouldn't have had enough money to spend on Christmas gifts if it wasn't for this," she said.

Most of the parents who came to choose gifts left their children at home so they could surprise them on Christmas morning. Due to the large turnout of parents, Grace Place officials estimate that the donated toys will reach nearly 800 children.

Grace Place is a nonprofit organization that provides education to low-income youth and adults living within Golden Gate. Typically, children taking classes at the



The local nonprofit gave toys to 800 children receiving an education through the various programs.

center receive books for Christmas.

"What we found from talking with our parents this year was that many of them had to use the money they were saving for Christmas to pay bills because of (Hurricane) Irma," said Dave Tobiasz, chief operating officer of Grace Place.

"Many parents weren't working during Irma for weeks or months, so we decided to give out presents for the first time in a long time."

Along with one toy for each child, parents could also select a pajama set.

It took about 40 volunteers to turn an ordinary room into Santa's workshop.

Retired Marco Island resident Gail Hoopes wore a huge smile as she helped parents place their wrapped presents inside a large plastic bag to hide from their children until Christmas Day.

She's volunteered with Grace Place for the past five years and said she loves every minute of it.

"I do it because I love the foundation of this place, which is education, as well as helping the community," she said.

Stephanie Valencia, a mother of three, was all smiles as she successfully balanced boxes of LEGO's, learning blocks and Play-Doh in her arms before dumping them into a large bag.

She said Grace Place is a godsend to her 2-year-old twin girls and 5-year-old son.

"I'm not working. My husband is the only one who is, so when Grace Place told us about this we were very excited," Valencia said.

Families pick out gifts for their children inside the Christmas store at Grace Place for Children and Families.

