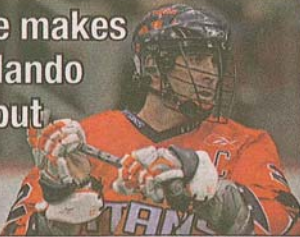


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■ ABRAHAM ABORAYA
Guest Reporter

Ask Pastor Wally Meyer if he has any favorite stories from volunteering with Caroling for Kids for the last six years and he'll pause. His favorite story isn't a specific one, but rather one that unfolds every year at Florida Hospital East.

Every year, there are children with the group of carolers bringing Christmas spirit — and gifts — to children in the hospital on Christmas. And every year, a child will go into a room and give a toy to another child.

"There's just a connection immediately, the kid smiling at the bed," said Meyer, who was a Florida Hospital East Foundation board member until a few years ago. "It's so neat to see that. And that happens on a regular basis."

Since Christmas 1998, Nathaniel's Hope, a non-profit Christian mission organization dedicated to helping children with disabilities, has organized Caroling for Kids. It all started with Marie Kuck, the executive director.

Kuck's son Nathaniel was born prematurely on June 6, 1997, with multiple birth defects, including duodenal-arteria (the absence or closure of the first section of the small intestine) and craniosynostosis (a condition where the skull closes too early in development, causing brain and skull growth problems). He spent most of his four and a half years in and out of hospitals, being fed through tubes and getting multiple surgeries.

That included Christmas 1997, Nathaniel's first Christmas. While in the hospital, Kuck realized that no one wanted to be there on Christmas — not the patients, not the families and not the caregivers.



Groups of carolers visit disabled children in local hospitals during the holidays each year to lift their spirits as part of Nathaniel's Hope's Caroling for Kids. PHOTOS COURTESY OF NATHANIEL'S HOPE

So the next year, Kuck got about 40 volunteers together and they walked through the hospital, singing carols and giving small presents to the children.

"This last year, we had 550 people going into the hospitals in 14 caroling teams," Kuck said.

Nathaniel's Hope, Kuck's organization, is ramping up for this Christmas. Before the big day, they are asking the community to donate prepackaged snack items, Christmas cookies, big red and white candy canes and beanie babies. The deadline to drop off items is Dec. 16, and the items can be dropped off at any Walgreens, including the

location at State Road 436 and Curry Ford Road.

They also need volunteer carolers and musicians on Christmas Day to bring cheer to the hospital as well as homebound children with disabilities, which over the past few years the program has been expanded to include. Last year, they paired 72 homebound children with 72 groups of carolers to sing and hand out presents. Kuck said that having a child with disabilities can be severely taxing financially, and for some families, the gifts Nathaniel's Hope gives are the only gifts the children get.

"The needs are incredible," Kuck said. "We're trying to

identify the families that are the neediest and that truly couldn't come to us to get the help they need."

Nathaniel's Hope organizes four major programs every year, including Caroling for Kids. They offer the Buddy Break program, which allows families with children with special needs to drop their child off at a church and take a break for an hour or two. They offer the Birthday VIP program, which sends various cards and letters of encouragement to children throughout the year.

Every June, Nathaniel's Hope puts on the Make 'm Smile event, which celebrates Nathaniel's birthday. This June,

they had 7,000 people at the event, including 1,000 kids with special needs.

Meyer, a pastor at Calvary Assembly of God in Orlando, said that he would encourage anyone thinking about volunteering to do it. He said caroling in hospitals on Christmas has helped him to better appreciate time with his family on Christmas.

"Oh Amen," Meyer said. "I don't know that I've ever spent a night in the hospital. To think that you're there on Christmas, when it's such a family day and a day to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, you're even more thankful of what you have."