



## Families' Holidays Brightened At Children's House

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OCEAN CITY -- Children and families coping with critical illness were able to relax and enjoy the holidays last Friday when the Believe in Tomorrow Children's Foundation House by the Sea hosted its annual Christmas party in Ocean City. "It's amazing that they go through all of this effort," said Cheryl Urban, whose 7-year-old son Morgan was invited by the foundation to last Friday's event.

Along with his mother, Morgan Urban was able to bring both an older brother and a younger sister to the party, which was hosted by the 67th Street Holiday Inn. The Urbans joined several other families for free food, games and a chance to meet Santa, who posed for pictures, took gift requests and read a few holiday stories to the children. "It was absolutely amazing," said Tammy West, who brought three children to the party. Cheryl Urban stressed how important it was that the foundation not only looks out for critically ill children, but their parents, relatives and especially their siblings. "It affects the whole family ... When it hits the children, it hits the whole family," she said of her son's illness.

According to Cheryl Urban, critical illness in a child is "too big for individual families to [deal with] alone," which is why she is so appreciative of the House by the Sea and similar organizations. She pointed out that the foundation not only provides vacations and events that serve as breaks in the hectic life of caring for a chronically sick child, but also facilitates lots of parents coming together to form their own support group. They are able to network using sites like Facebook and through email, said Cheryl Urban, where parents are able to share advice, personal experiences and words of encouragement. "This is so necessary," she said of the foundation. Besides last Friday's party, the House by the Sea offers other events and vacations throughout the year. "In the summer, we're busy every day," said Wayne Littleton, executive director of House by the Sea.

Littleton has been with the foundation for more than a decade and said he developed a number of good memories during that time. House by the Sea often brings in guests for holiday events, but also serves as a free place to stay for families looking to spend an easy weekend by the beach, no matter what time of year. The foundation is a large organization, with more than 100 volunteers by Littleton's estimation. Several of those volunteers were on-hand during the Christmas party, including a trio of young friends who recently joined House by the Sea.

Charlotte Deck, who has been working with the foundation for more than a year, chartered a Believe in Tomorrow club at the University of Southern California, which, since its inception, has grown from 12 members to around 50. "It's cool to see how much fun the kids have," said Deck.

Hannah Smith-Hisler and Leah Izzit both joined together roughly two months ago and agreed with Deck that the work is rewarding. But people don't have to volunteer directly with the foundation to lend a hand. For this year's party, a room was provided free of charge by the Holiday Inn. And when General Manager Jason Gulshen learned that House by the Sea needed refreshments, the hotel decided to provide those, also free of charge. "We try to cater to families," said Gulshen. This wasn't the first time Holiday Inn has helped the foundation either.

"We've gotten relatively involved over the last two years with them ... In the summer months, we invite them to use our facilities," Gulshen said. Littleton confirmed that Gulshen and the Holiday Inn have been extremely generous and that the partnership, along with ones like it in the community, is what makes Believe in Tomorrow possible. Of equal importance, he stressed, were the efforts of volunteers, though like Deck, he follows the idiom that giving is its own reward.

"You get to make kids happy," said Littleton. "What's better than that?" Volunteer Jim Hamlin concurred. Twelve years ago, Hamlin suffered a stroke, an event he deemed a wake-up call. It served as a catalyst to push him into the world of volunteering. And in the decade-plus he's spent with House by the Sea, Hamlin had nothing but good things to say about the agency. "It's a wonderful organization where you meet a lot of wonderful people," he said. The half-dozen or so families that were invited to last Friday's event all clearly had a good time and parents were unanimous in their respect for what Littleton does. West jokingly referred to him as a "trip" while Cheryl Urban called him "out of this world."