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/'karita:s/ (noun) love of humankind, charity

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See You at the Crossroads



Crossroads Urban Center continues to fight poverty in Salt Lake City, with the task growing more difficult as other forms of community aid disappear around it

Taylor Larsen
Caritas/The Enterprise

Crossroads Urban Center’s work imbues its downtown location with resilience. Nestled between two modern apartment complexes under construction, sits the headquarters for the emergency services provider. While everything around it is changing, the organization’s building remains largely unchanged from its original construction in the early 1900s — as does Crossroads’ mission: Fight poverty tooth and nail.

The organization is fresh off its 57th anniversary, Executive Director Glenn Bailey said. Since his involvement with the organization began in 1984, Bailey has monitored changes across the city. Salt Lake City’s population has grown from 160,000 people to 200,000, the Delta Center is again the Delta Center after multiple rebrands, but, he said, “the funny thing is how many things haven’t changed. When I started as a director, there was an affordable housing crisis. It’s a refrain many residents of the capital — even statewide — have heard before.”

Other conditions haven’t changed from 1992. The organization still pushes to eliminate the grocery tax, still provides emergency services and still champions housing affordability.

“A lot of our work is ongoing, like poverty is,” Bailey said. “It’s a bit of a damning indictment.”

Housing

Take homelessness. “It’s hard to avoid it,” Bailey said, straight to the point.

It’s hard to avoid the issues contributing to homelessness, too. Housing prices rising higher and higher each year across the city are one major component contributing to homelessness, he said, a corollary for the demographics Crossroads serves.

Whereas the organization mostly served food-insecure families and the occasional unhoused person in 1992, today 40 percent to 50 percent of people served are unhoused, with Bailey mentioning that there are more unsheltered people in Salt Lake City than ever before. This sobering fact is corroborated by data from Utah’s Department of Workforce Services and outreach efforts from many community partners.

Housing prices, he said, are not just a homelessness issue, however. It is a poverty issue that affects everyone. With a vacancy rate in Salt Lake County below 2 percent and an average rent in the capital city at nearly \$1,700, it’s no wonder that data from the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute shows that nearly half of Salt Lake County households are spending over one-third of their income on housing.

That greatly affects the other half of clients served at Crossroads: families. Bailey said that many across the state are mere weeks away from losing expanded food stamp benefits, and with the price of gasoline and child care remaining very high, the situation is ever-challenging. It’s part of many challenges the pandemic

brought to the forefront — housing instability and food insecurity chief among them.

The pandemic set Crossroads back in a few key areas. The emergency services provider lost a huge portion of volunteers who could not risk contracting COVID-19. As the thrift store and Westside food pantry closed until Crossroads regained its footing, the organization consolidated around the headquarters.

Always an organization to try new things and unwilling to bend the knee to poverty, “We got different volunteers,” Bailey joked of the younger crowd “bored during the pandemic” that signed up to help. A few of the previous volunteers returned

and the organization made signing up and participating far more accessible.

The 400-plus volunteers assist a collection of full-time and part-time staff to keep the organization engaged in fighting against the causes and symptoms of poverty. While a quarter of their work is spent on policy issues, a lot of the work is performing intakes to connect clients with the services they need, said Bailey, “for today, tomorrow, next week or next month.”

He even mentioned that the Crossroads team has been engaging neighbors to showcase how everyone

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Food distribution is a key part of the essential work of the Crossroads Urban Center.



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can work together to not just fight poverty, but find peace amid the hustle and bustle of downtown.

Bailey rattled off a list of what the organization carries to help individuals and families get through the day: vouchers for new children’s shoes, baby formula and diapers, pet food, UTA day passes, gasoline vouchers, ID card vouchers and even health items like hygiene kits and prescription vouchers.

A lot of Crossroads’ resources are devoted to one critical need: food. Clients can come to these facilities a couple times per month for three-day food boxes, or as many as three times a week for a bagged meal. Passing through the building to see how the



The Crossroads Urban Center Thrift Store is located at 1385 W. Indiana Ave. in the Poplar Grove neighborhood of Salt Lake City.

gears turn is a showcase in efficiency. Intake desks are the central cog — a collaborative effort between client and staff to try and troubleshoot where Crossroads can assist best.

Crossroads receives many of its donations from the Utah Food Bank — hundreds of thousands of pounds of food, according to Bailey. Other organizations and individuals are up to the task, too. Whether from donors like Welfare Square and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or from food drives performed by Boy Scout groups, neighborhoods, or even from the Letter Carriers’ Stamp Out Hunger food drive, Crossroads Urban Center takes donations of produce, canned items, bread loaves and more.

Crossroads also operates a food pantry and thrift store in Salt Lake’s Poplar Grove neighborhood. The thrift store is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and gives nine out of 10 items away for free — pots, pans, blankets, sleeping bags — to try and get its clientele out of emergency survival and into stability.

Monday through Friday business hours are the organization’s standard operating times at the SLC headquarters, while the Westside food pantry is open Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. Bailey explained the particular hours as less of a staffing issue and far more of a resource availability issue. One consistent issue when discussing opening the Westside pantry for a fifth day is that there wouldn’t be anything to give away — there isn’t enough food. The problem is so bad, Bailey

said, that the organization purchased more food than ever before in 2022 — to the tune of \$30,000.

It’s a part of the changes to Crossroads’ work that Bailey mentioned earlier, with emergency spending eclipsing \$90,000 — up from \$53,000 in 2020. For the work done by the organization to keep people fed and clothed, it is money well-spent, especially as the organization finds new ways to fight against poverty, food insecurity and other problems.

Past Work Informs Future

One legacy of Crossroads Urban Center has been to start other organizations to help advocate for more specialized interests surrounding poverty. After a Crossroads survey of homeless and formerly homeless mothers, current and former clients combined with the organization to create Powerful Moms Who Care that was founded 2018.

The work by Powerful Moms Who Care includes advocacy for safe, secure and affordable housing, along with financially accessible child care and transportation. The work led by these mothers is, in part, financially supported by Crossroads. Bailey said the spin-off group is “semi-autonomous.”

Other groups that can trace their roots to Crossroads Urban Center include Utahns Against Hunger in the 1970s; Wasatch Community Gardens in the 1980s; Disabled Rights Action Committee in the 1990s; and Sarah



Crossroads staff members Lilia Flores (left) and Erika Gee (right) at the Crossroads 2022 Thanksgiving food giveaway at Smith’s Ballpark in Salt Lake City.



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Publisher’s Note: Caritas Quarterly is an affiliated publication of The Enterprise Newspaper Group Inc.

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House Utah, formed around a decade ago as a shipping container home project that has gone on to advocate for innovative solutions to housing.

Crossroads also works in conjunction with the faith community and the Coalition of Religious Communities.

“We work with people of faith who want to be involved on economic justice issues” in the state, county or city, according to Bailey. Eliminating the grocery tax, expanding and preserving low-income housing — whatever they advocate for, there is strength behind it. “There are a lot

of people who are passionate about improving conditions for people who have the least. They are a really strong group,” said Bailey.

The passage of Medicaid expansion was a big win for the organization. “As soon as people had access to Medicaid, we didn’t have as many people with emergency prescriptions,” Bailey said. He is confident that full access to Medicaid dental will happen this year.

The work to eliminate poverty may require some uncomfortable moments, but significant success is on the horizon, even if it will take a Herculean effort to get there. Crossroads Urban Center will continue at the forefront of this challenge, as Bailey said, to alleviate the challenges that require people to access emergency services.



Client intake is the crucial first step to access emergency services from the organization.



Staff members wear many hats to keep the organization humming, from unloading food to advocating for client needs to working with community partners to access services.



Volunteers unload food at the 2022 Crossroads Thanksgiving food giveaway.



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Stephanie Wilson
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Pantry Asst. Director
& Outreach Coordinator

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Building from the ground up

Support for individuals with multiple disabilities and their families

Taylor Larsen
Caritas/The Enterprise

At Bear-O Care’s Riverton facility, there is a joke that that the organization is often confused by passersby for Build-A-Bear. Here though, they are building something else: a sense of community and camaraderie for adults with multiple disabilities and their families.

The impetus for the organization began in 1998. Michael and Ruth Braga were in married student housing at the University of Utah and finishing the extensive paperwork to prepare them for adoption. They were told to get comfortable and expect a year or so before anything would happen. Four months later, their caseworker called about a boy who was born blind and deaf and diagnosed with CHARGE syndrome at birth. Would they be willing to consider adopting him?

They needed the night to think about it, but it wasn’t so much deciding yes or no — the answer was a resounding “yes” — it was to begin formulating a plan for their new family. A week later, the Braga family drove home with Brandon in tow.

A later move to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, allowed Brandon to receive a higher level of care from schools and other facilities. Ruth became a nurse during their seven years there, then the family returned to Utah for Michael to study deaf and blind education. There, Trudi O’Brien worked with the family as the intervener for Brandon.

The role of an intervener, O’Brien said, focuses on learning how the client communicates with the outside world and how the outside world

communicates with them. This is a role and service often provided in youth, but once children age out of the initial system, their resources drop dramatically.

“You spend all these years working with them,” she said, “and then it all goes away at 22.”

New Organization Emerges

Unwilling to let that happen to Brandon and the other individuals and families they knew, the Bragas and O’Brien founded

Bear-O Care in 2015 to help care for individuals of all ages with multiple disabilities who are often turned away from other facilities because of their physical disabilities. Bear-O Care is a bit of a play on words. “Bear” comes from Brandon’s nickname “Brandon Bear,” while the

O in the organization’s name comes from the “O” in O’Brien and the final sound of Ruth Braga’s maiden name, Bereau (also pronounced “Bear-O”).

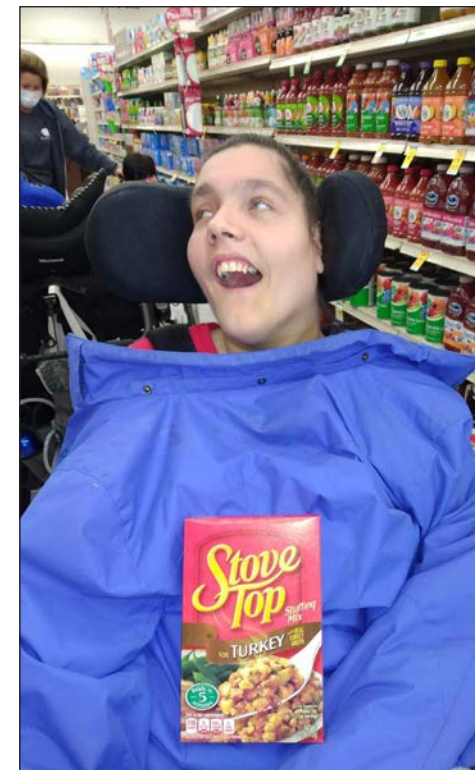
The organization is designed to serve those with a combination of deaf, blindness, cerebral palsy, Rett syndrome and CHARGE syndrome, including those who need gastric tubes for feedings, those who are incontinent or diapered, wheelchair-dependent or wholly dependent on others for activities of daily living.

Michael Braga gives the tour of the Riverton facility — and it’s bustling inside. Procuring the facility was an emotional win for the team, as they were able to truly commence their work. Inside, some clients are catching up on their favorite Netflix shows, others are enjoying a snack and one needs help opening up the door to the sensory room.



Bear-O Care

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The sensory input is a major component of Bear-O Care’s work. With a few of its clients unable to see, the opportunity to feel is a unifier within the group. Whether it is feeling dry rice, sandpaper or carpet, clients find the different textures soothing and enjoyable. Michael Braga said that massage therapy and pressure input therapy also help relax their clients’ nervous systems and help them enjoy their time at the Bear-O Care facility.

Music therapy is another portion of the day center options for clients, as well as online religious classes.

Michael Braga said that day trips outside the center are particularly fun and run the spectrum of activity and interest level. Some clients take the time with the Bear-O Care staff to shop around; others spend the time at the store to get a better overview of what it would be like to work there. Michael Braga said that a staffer is taking a few of the older clients to a bar in the coming weeks, since a few of them enjoy beer.

For the organization, the work to serve people with multiple disabilities, especially as it relates to funding these services, is misunderstood.

Overcoming the Misunderstanding

The misunderstanding starts between the federal funding mechanisms to serve these clients and how to access that funding. These programs are often funded based on employment opportunities for clients. This is not a successful model to help these clients or their families live

healthy and fulfilling lives.

Guidelines dictate that clients who receive funding must be actively looking for work or working on skills related to employment — no exceptions. But with the clients at Bear-O Care, employment-related tasks are often wholly out of the question. For Brandon, now in his mid-20s, even a job as simple as taking tickets at a movie theater would require an aide or intervener to take the ticket and assist Brandon with his other personal tasks like eating and using the bathroom.

Michael Braga asked, within these parameters, “How is the client benefiting [from working]?”

So the organization is making some proverbial lemonade. The organization has looked to create solutions to bring in that funding and serve their clients. They “explore” different jobs at the center, learning about their parameters and even traveling as a group to see the job in action as part of their daily activities.

It’s a part of the differences the team has noticed between theory and reality.

“College theory and real life are very different,” Michael Braga said of the actual day-in, day-out work with people who have multiple disabilities. Instead of the 15-minute activities interspersed throughout the day that he planned while he was in college, work for staff is personalized for each client, learning each client’s unique communication styles and finding ways for clients to enjoy a happy and fulfilling life.

“This is social interaction for them,” said Michael Braga. “They are with their peers; they’re making choices on what to do with their free time.” They are not just surviving, they



Founders of Bear-O Care are (L-R) Trudi O'Brien, Michael Braga, Ruth Braga.

are living and thriving surrounded by people who support and care for them.

Creating Services

Bear-O Care readily accepts volunteers — from Eagle Scout and service projects to cleaning projects, internships and volunteer hours for school.

O'Brien said, “They come away grateful for the view they have. They will see syndromes and diagnoses that you won’t see as an occupational therapy or physical therapy student.”

The visibility component of this work is understated. For those with Down syndrome and higher functioning disabilities, “they’re very much in the public eye,” said Michael Braga. “And then you have clients like ours who have fallen through the cracks.”

Many of their clients aged out of the school system at 22. After that date, all of the support networks built through organizations that work with these folks have dissipated. “Dropped” from services is a bit of

an understatement, Michael Braga explained. “Like an ex-partner, they ghost you,” he said. “If they don’t fit into work program or community college, they can get lost in the system.”

Instead, the Bear-O Care founders hoped that the transition process could be easier on families, where services for clients don’t go from 100 percent to zero percent once they reach age 22.

That being said, while a majority of the work is geared toward consistent care for clients 18 and older, Bear-O Care works with those under 18 years old as well on a limited basis. The organization offers respite care to children whose families may need time for weekly errands, work or even an afternoon break.

Because, Ruth Braga said, kids

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grow up and then are stuck at home where their parents are exhausted. The resources to support their kids do not exist. With the estimated 2,200 people in Utah with multiple disabilities who need the level of care offered by the organization, more needs to be done at the public level to help clients and their families enjoy a happy, healthy life.

Building the Team

Work continues at the Bear-O Care offices to keep clients, staff and state officials engaged in this challenging work and bringing these serves to as many as possible.

In the executive team, Ruth Braga is the analyst, along with policy and procedure. She was instrumental in working to change laws regarding who can work with patients with feeding tubes, creating a greater level of accessibility to help clients receive care.

Michael Braga is in the public eye and is involved talking to families and community partners. He calls himself the Ronald McDonald of the group — the only thing missing is the red hair.

O'Brien is about getting the daily work done and done on time, something she attributes to her work as an intervener. She explains that daily work as something like a puzzle.

"When you finally put the piece in place, [clients] are ecstatic because someone listened to them and got them exactly what they needed," she said.

The 20-member staff receives client-specific training to be able to work with the 30 clients that pass through the doors nearly every day. Team members may not have children or family members with disabilities, the executive team said, but they have been moved to give their all as they work with this population.

The trauma-informed nature of their work allows things to happen on client time. Michael Braga explains it like a trip in a car: Their clients are definitely up for the trip, but their priorities are different: "They're going to take the back roads."

Whatever the route, Bear-O Care is along for the ride. The team maintains a private Facebook page to keep the connection strong and inform client families of what's going on at the facility. Bear-O Care also holds a consistent in-person support group to



Bear-O Care is always looking for volunteers to assist in their mission

bring parents together.

"We know parents on a different level. The people who are part of the family have stuck with it," Michael Braga said, pausing before continuing. "We're loyal to them and they are loyal to us."

"It's nice to know that others understand it," O'Brien said. "All of our clientele are older. We've been doing this forever."

They mention that the Braga family's experience raising a child with these issues builds a lot of trust.

"All of us parents can relate," Michael Braga said. "There are lots of

tears [and] lots of laughing."

The laughs come from clients, too. O'Brien and the Bragas and the rest of the staff greet every client with a nickname whenever the team sees them, and the clients get the biggest kick out of that.

"You cannot be depressed around our clients," Michael Braga said. "It's just impossible."

The smiles are contagious and so is the willingness of the folks at Bear-O Care to uncover the best ways to help individuals with multiple disabilities and the families who love and support them.



Bear-O Care

Executive Team

Michael Braga
Executive Director

Trudi O'Brien
Operations Manager

Ruth Braga
Nursing Director

Board of Directors

Michael Braga
Executive Director

Trudi O'Brien
Manager

Jenifer Lloyd
Legal Advisor

Dr. Michael Lloyd
Medical Advisor

Neil Mahoney
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Greg Cantrell
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Ruth Braga MSN, RN
Director of Nursing & Policy



The staff at Bear-O Care are a spirited bunch committed to their mission.



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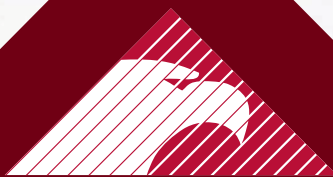
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Single Parent Project .

Outreach from the Single Parent Project helps to connect single-parent families to financial resources and the confidence to create a bright future

Taylor Larsen
Caritas/The Enterprise

Meghann Brimhall was a single mom for five years and remembers well what it was like to rely on herself as she raised her two sons after her divorce. Instead of focusing on its challenges, she spoke of wonderful support systems all around her.

“I knew that if I swallowed my pride and asked for help, I could get it,” she said. “I recognized how fortunate my situation was.”

But others in a similar boat weren’t so lucky. She recalled watching a friend and coworker struggle as a single parent with an unavailable co-parent and an unsupportive family. Then, to top it off, the friend’s car was repossessed.

“I am such a fixer,” she said of her natural inclination to help. But as a single mom, just getting by herself at the time, Brimhall couldn’t offer anything but empathy. So, she made a promise to herself. “One day, I am going to be in a position where I can

give back and help people who are in this situation.”

Years later, she began what would eventually become the Single Parent Project with a Facebook page and an idea. The page told about a fictional single mom in a pinch who needed \$500 to take care of her bills. The idea was to see if there was an appetite among friends and friends of friends to crowdfund a single parent.

She showed it to longtime friend, Alissa Harrod, who thought it was real and then began sharing it in every community she could.

“All of the sudden, I’m getting Venmo donations,” Brimhall said. Two thousand dollars later, she needed a recipient for all of this goodwill and reached out to her network to find that there were plenty of potential recipients.

Thus, the Single Parent Project was born.

Today, the organization consists of 10 volunteers, along with co-founders Brimhall and Harrod, who are looking to build up single parents across the Beehive State.

Accessing the Organization

The two founders have been happy with the community response and how word has spread from their supporters.

“Some of our best supporters have been someone seeing a post from someone else,” Brimhall said.

“Everybody knows a single parent. It impacts us all.”

What sets the Single Parent Project apart from other organizations is the requirements before accessing services. The organization wants people who are working full time or are going to school full time to better their career or job prospects — single parents who need a little push to kickstart their journey.

Clients are required to meet with a financial advisor who goes over every

dollar the family spends for the month. “He knows if our help is going to put them in a better spot or if help would be better elsewhere,” she said. Simply put, Single Parent Project is looking to “help people who are interested in helping themselves.”

Brimhall told a story of one parent with a \$368 monthly car bill, leaving the woman with no savings after

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The volunteer staff of the Single Parent Project is committed to easing the burden of single parents around Utah.





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taking care of all of her obligations. Instead of treading water, the women received money from the Single Parent Project to pay off her car and begin saving toward other needs.

Consistent meeting with the support group is another requirement that helps to build connections that last long past the six-month program.

“I’m proud of the community we have with the support groups, where they feel like family members to each other,” Brimhall said. “I want to grow that in different ways where people can come out in a different place,” places that aren’t just discussion groups, but activities and other casual get-togethers that make this support even more accessible.

Support comes in the form of increased access to therapy and counseling, financial assistance and planning and even life coaching during the program.

“Helping people with their confidence is huge,” Brimhall said, mentioning how building these single parents up is the goal. “We want them to see what we can see: strong, resilient individuals trying their best.”

Christmas Time to Shine

The organization’s Christmas Project has gotten bigger and better each year as it helps families enjoy Christmas generosity from the community.

“It’s an opportunity to give back in a simple way,” said Brimhall.

Even in five years of single parenting, Brimhall’s family “never went without on Christmas. I had a wonderful support system where I could make one phone call and my dad could easily help us out. My dad was the real-life Santa Claus.”

The premise for the Christmas Project is simple: The Single Parent Project sends out information about families — be they small ones with one to two kids, or large families of three to six children — and the wish lists from those families at Christmas season.

What started with 65 families when the organization began in 2020 went to 80 families in 2021. Christmas in 2022 was the biggest yet. “We had a goal of 100 families and we ended up helping 120 families,” Brimhall said.

The response from the community was so good that the organization did not use all the sponsors who had signed up. She said that next year’s goal is 200 families served with the Christmas Project. It’s a stretch, she said, but the response from the community and the hard work from her team gives her confidence that the organization can hit another milestone.

“I want other people to feel that joy and excitement waking up on



Activities for single parents, like the "Trunk-or-Treat" the organization hosted last year, have been a great way to build a sense of community.

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- Robyn Everts



Fundraising has been a big success for the Single Parent Project, with founder Meghann Brimhall saying that the community has been incredibly supportive.

each other's kids."

As a connector of single parents across the Wasatch Front, Brimhall said, "Those connections will forever be in my heart. I love that we can be that [connection] for these people."

The project is also building a database for out-of-state applicants (currently 75 percent of total applicants) to access needed services. Brimhall said anything the organization could do to keep the fire alive for single parents reaching out goes to show that someone, anyone, cares enough to help those same parents out. "Hopefully it is enough for them to reach out to these other places," she said.

The organization has found the secret sauce to bringing its clients success, a testament to the Single Parent Project's strong work ethic as a group and a willingness from people and businesses to support the single parents around the community.

The fix-it attitude that led Brimhall and Harrod to start the organization is evident throughout their work. Support, connection, resilience, stability, confidence — the Single Parent Project isn't just bringing these attributes to their clients but showing clients those attributes have been within themselves all along.

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Christmas Day," said Brimhall.

Future of the Group

Beyond increasing staff, finding new ways to serve single parents and more presents for families during the holiday season, Brimhall said their goal is to have more free activities for parents to meet each other outside of the more emotionally vulnerable bi-weekly support groups.

"We had a trunk-or-treat that got 200 kids and their parents to come," she said. "Anything we can do that is a free activity."

The "Reindeer Night" the organization hosted before the holidays was a hit, even amid the freezing temperatures.

"It was so fun to watch families huddle around the heaters and chat," she said. These people didn't know each other when they first began attending the groups and received assistance "but now they hug each other hello and goodbye and know



The holiday season is especially busy for the Single Parent Project as staffers look to help dozens of families enjoy Christmastime.



Founders Meghann Brimhall (left) and Alissa Harrod attend a gala for the Single Parent Project.



Santa and Mrs. Claus were a hit at the Single Parent Project's holiday celebration in 2022.

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