

# Residents of Community Haven get holiday joy



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*SARASOTA* - James Waddell stood in front of the television, analyzing Michael Jackson's every move. Every Halloween, Waddell, who has Down syndrome, dresses as the singer down to the single sequined glove and the red jacket. He takes his MJ seriously. It was a surprise to nobody when Waddell was the one dancing to the Christmas songs played on the accordion and banjo during Tuesday's holiday gathering.

Every year, bus drivers and other transportation workers at Sarasota County Schools throw a party for Waddell and the other adults with disabilities at Community Haven. Many district employees perform such acts of kindness during the holiday season. But these gift-givers are among the district's lowest paid workers, some getting salaries less than \$20,000 a year. Yet, they still give back. "We fill up their Christmas for them," said retired bus driver Karen Dunn, who had a 38-year career on the road. "You get a good feeling in your heart."

The bus drivers, the garage mechanics, bus aides — about 100 people in all — play Santa for the 24 residents. It's not always an easy job at all with hard-to-find items. Where does one find a talking watch for a man who is blind? Or a polo shirt? But just not any polo shirt, either. It has to be a yellow-and-white one, another resident requested.

As Waddell opened his presents, he held each one up and took a hard look. A bottle of cologne. A pair of blue cargo shorts. A new pillow. He shrieked as he opened up the Michael Jackson CD, near the end. He held the CD up to his chest. Around him, others admired their new Twilight movie calendars and stuffed animals.

The holiday tradition started in 1966 by now retired bus drivers Jim and Charleen Chaich with the Fraternal Order of the Eagles. The school transportation department picked it up in 1992, giving presents to Community Haven annually since then.

Community Haven works with youth and adults who have disabilities such as autism, Down syndrome and other developmental disabilities. "Often times, it's children who are thought about at Christmastime. These adults are left out," said Wendy York, a Sarasota bus route supervisor who coordinates the holiday program. "They're so grateful. It makes their day. It makes their season. For me, this is what's it's all about."