

## Ruth Eckerd Hall Employees Understand Real Joy of the Holiday Season

Photo: Some of the more than 25 Ruth Eckerd Hall employees that volunteer for the Camelot Community Care children's party.

Horrendous traffic, long lines at the stores and rainy, cold weather made last Wednesday a depressing day. But for the employees at Ruth Eckerd Hall (REH), it was to be an afternoon filled with holiday spirit. Over 25 of the Hall's employees donated their time and money to make this season bright for the foster care children from Camelot Community Care.

Camelot Care, located in 5 states with 8 offices in Florida, recruit, license and train therapeutic foster parents. The children they place in homes with foster parents have been unsuccessful in traditional foster homes due to their severe mental health issues, exposure to domestic violence, exposure to drugs/alcohol, physical and/or sexual abuse and neglect. Children typically remain in Camelot's program for 1-2 years, and are then either reunified with their biological families, adopted or placed with relatives. Locally, Camelot Community Care works with 27 foster homes and 32 foster children. These were the children and families that REH employees entertained on Wednesday afternoon.

The children, ages 5-17, and their foster families were to arrive at 6 p.m., but shortly after 5:30 expectant eyes peered through the glass door leading into the Marguerite Heye Great Room. As the doors opened, one could see excitement in each child's eyes, many singing "We Wish You a Merry Christmas," as they scampered up the stairs. This elegant room had been decorated for the holidays, and places were set for over 100 expected guests. The children began the evening's festivities with carnival games. They then enjoyed a buffet dinner, including

favorites such as chicken with rice, macaroni and cheese and salad "tossed" in for good measure. Dessert included "make-your-own" sundaes with ice-cream donated by Matt Hoffman's Old Meeting House restaurant in South Tampa. Matt is the president of the Performing Arts Center and Theater (PACT) Inc. Board which oversees the operation of Ruth Eckerd Hall.

Christmas and other holiday carols were sung after dessert. Santa, known to some as Jeff Hertzog Facilities Director at the Hall, stopped by for a visit giving each child their own Christmas stocking.

"Part of the mission of Ruth Eckerd Hall is bringing arts to the community," explained REH Human Resources Manager Deb Vermeer. She added that "these kids and their foster families really appreciate this event." Norma Romey, Executive Assistant to Ruth Eckerd Hall's CEO Robert Friedman, explained that it is not just the kids that benefit from this event; "Not only are we doing something for some really deserving kids, but our staff uses this as a time to get to know each other better. It's a way for us all to enjoy the holiday together."

Several days after the REH holiday party, Lisa Powanda, Executive Director of the Clearwater Office of Camelot Community Care, spoke about the joy that Ruth Eckerd Hall has brought into these children's lives over the past four holiday seasons. She commented that, "Ruth Eckerd Hall has continually provided Camelot with a festive evening filled with laughter, food and holiday cheer ... giving our most special foster children a magical night which they will always remember." The employees from Ruth Eckerd Hall, who helped with this event, should be commended for using their fabulous facility, their financial resources and mostly their talents and personal abilities to represent the true meaning of this holiday season.

Anyone interested in learning more about Camelot Community Care can call 727-593-0003, or visit the national website at [www.camelotcommunitycare.org](http://www.camelotcommunitycare.org).