

The gift of giving and receiving

By **Sarah Menesale**/ News Staff Writer

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Giving is an integral part of the holiday season for many people. But for the 20 boys in the Robert F. Kennedy Children Action Corp Westboro facility it means a little more to be able to give.

The boys, aged 13 to 21, have been found guilty of crimes ranging from drug possession to assault and live in Allen Hall Treatment Center on the grounds of Westborough State Hospital.

From the little they earn by doing small jobs at the center or for good behavior, the boys donate to charitable organizations. This holiday season they will give to a group that helps make their holiday a little brighter.

The boys of Allen Hall will be able to experience both parts of the Westborough Interfaith Giving Tree program - the giving and the receiving.

"They're so generous to us. We want to be generous back," said "Paul," a young man in the program. The boys real names are not being used.

For more than 20 years the Giving Tree program run by St. Luke's the Evangelist Church has given gifts to the boys of the RFK program. Now working with three other churches in town, the annual Giving Tree program has expanded and been renamed as the Westborough Interfaith Giving Tree. They expect to hand out some 1,400 gifts this year, said Pat Gagnon, who organizes the event.

Some of those gifts will make it over to Allen Hall and fulfill the wish lists of the boys.

"I think it's nice that they go out of their way to help us out and make us feel better. We're in here for the holidays so it's not that easy. They really care," said "Tony," a young man in the program.

To thank them for their years of giving, the boys decided to donate \$200 to the Interfaith's Giving Tree to purchase eight supermarket gift cards for food for the holidays.

"When I was at home I never got to do anything for anyone. I see this as my chance to help someone out and do something better with my life," said "Paul."

The boys will also be making eight small baskets, almost like big stockings, for small children in need. The baskets will feature hygiene products and small toys like coloring books. "I'm looking forward to it," said "Tony."

The youths fund their donations by writing \$1 checks in the name of their victims each week as part of what the facility calls a "restitution fund." Instead of mailing the checks, the funds are collected and placed into an account to be given to charitable organizations.

"It shows we remember who we hurt and it proves that we care about our victims," said "Paul."

About \$80 is collected each month and the giving is very democratic. The boys vote on who would best be suited for the money.

They have previously given to the Salvation Army for Hurricane Katrina relief, the Worcester County Food Bank and Boston Children's Hospital.

"They really think things through and think long and hard about whom to give the money to. They all come up with suggestions and reasons," said Sally Bond, assistant director of the program. "It teaches them a lot about cooperation."

To receive gifts from the Giving Tree, Bond writes wish lists for each boy in the program. Through the Giving Tree program, children can request five reasonably-priced gifts, which translates to five individual gift tags. Givers at the participating churches have until the Dec. 10 weekend to purchase gifts for the program.

"I appreciate what they give me. Anything on Christmas would be nice for me," said "Tony."

"It's just enough that we get something," added "Paul."

St. Luke's also brings the boys over gifts on Valentine's Day and Halloween.

"It's not just a one time a year thing. They are so community minded," said Bond.

For more information on the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps' Robert F. Kennedy School, call 508-475-2676 or visit www.rfkchildren.org.

Still time to give and receive

Even though many of the tags have already been picked from the trees, Gagnon said families can still sign up with the program through this weekend. For those gifts that weren't filled, a group of volunteers from all of the participating churches takes the donated cash - the need ranges from \$600 to \$1,000 - and goes shopping.

Residents can donate to help fund these extra shopping trips through the Gifts of Hope program (see graphic, this page.)

"I've never seen so many generous people. Westborough is so lucky to have St. Luke's and this Interfaith Giving Tree program. I think it's good that it's a community effort," said Bond.