

HOLYOKE

HCC helps make holidays cheerful

Faculty, staff and students at Holyoke Community College helped spread holiday cheer last month as they delivered a record number of donated gifts to representatives from five local charities at the closing reception for the college's 19th annual Giving Tree campaign.

This year, the HCC community fulfilled the holiday wishes of 375 consumers from Homework House, WestMass ElderCare, the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the Holyoke Soldiers' Home, and — for the first time — Enlace de Familias, the Holyoke agency that has been working with Puerto Rican evacuees who left the island after the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria.

"Holyoke is such a welcoming city, but when you come with trauma and when you come with only the clothes on your back, there is a lot of need," said Betty Medina Lichtenstein, executive director of Enlace, the state-designated welcome center for

are very grateful. So, for them, may you all be blessed."

Each year during the annual campaign, which begins in early November, "Giving Trees" are set up in designated areas around campus. Participants choose color-coded tags from one of the nonprofit agencies based on the age of the recipient and their wish for a gift. The wrapped gifts are piled high on tables for the closing celebration, when HCC faculty, staff, and students join with representatives from the agencies to distribute the gifts and celebrate the season.

"This is an amazing tradition and always brings out the best of HCC," President Christina Royal said at the Giving Tree opening ceremony in November. "Last year was my first to partake in the Giving Tree experience and I was really blown away by the generosity of our community here at the college."

The sharing of stories from past recipients has become as much a part of the annual tradition as the presentation of



Luis Rene Robles of Holyoke, a home visitor in the Healthy Families program at the Mass. Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, holds up a donated gift.

Puerto Rican evacuees that has assisted more than 2,000 evacuees since Oct. 2017. "Last year, Christmas came quickly and gifts were not really part of the equation but with the help of what you are giving this year, they are going to have Christmas and so we

gifts. Roseann Martoccia, executive director of WestMass ElderCare, came prepared with testimonials written on small index cards.

Martoccia talked about "L.V.," a 72-year-old woman who received a small, lightweight vacuum last year.



Elsie Rodriguez-Garcia, director of HCC's STRIVE program; Betty Medina Lichtenstein, executive director of Enlace de Familias; and Gail Golas, chair of HCC's Giving Tree campaign, stand behind a cart filled with gifts for clients of Enlace.

"I didn't even know such a wonderful machine existed," the woman told her caregiver. "Thank you. You have made my Christmas dream a reality."

"S.H.," an 88-year-old woman who lives alone in Chicopee, got a toaster oven: "Mine is broken. This is a great gift and I'll put it to good use."

For 69-year-old "B.A." who lives in Holyoke, it was a pajama set with socks: "I love it, and it's something I really need."

Martoccia's last story was about "R.N.," a 91-year-old woman with dementia who was gifted a baby doll that doesn't cry.

"When she received the doll, she was very excited and happy about her new baby," Martoccia said. "Her family reports that the doll calms her during moments of distress, and our staff who visit her observe that she has the baby with her at all times, and she takes very good care of it."

"Thank you on behalf of our staff, the consumers and their caregivers," she said. "These gifts go a long way."

This year a selection of tags included requests for a winter coat for a teenage boy from Enlace de Familia; a nightgown for an 81-year-old woman from WestMass ElderCare, pajamas, socks, jeans, underwear, hats and gloves, a night light and Nerf toys for a



A pile of gifts designated for children at Homework House.

7-year-old boy from the MSP-CC's Healthy Families program; gift cards and clothes for residents of the Holyoke Soldiers' Home; and board games and school supplies for children at Homework House.

"You ease our hearts because you give gifts to the children in our Homework House family," said Sister Jane Morrissey, co-founder and site supervisor of the Holyoke's free after-school tutoring program. "We ask the schools and families to bring us the children most at risk for failure in school, so you know how vulnerable they are in multiple ways. So, thank you from the heart of Homework House."

Past Giving Tree closing ceremonies were held in the smaller Board of Trust-

ees conference room in the Frost Building. But with the addition of a fifth charity, the campaign has outgrown that space. This year's reception was held for the first time in the PeoplesBank Conference Center in HCC's Kittredge Center for Business and Workforce Development.

Also new this year, HCC student clubs held a variety of fundraisers to benefit the campaign, raising nearly \$500 that they used to buy gifts.

"It's not just the faculty, staff and students who give the gifts," Golas said. "We have people from outside in the community who come in; we have retirees still calling and saying, 'look, if you have leftover tags, give us a buzz, and we'll help out.'"