

# Spanz

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# Free Christmas event for deserving families



The Maireroa family were among the 700 children who enjoyed a range of free treats at the Christmas Store playground.

## Christmas Store 2017, an annual demonstration of pastoral nurturing supported by Auckland's St Columba Presbyterian Church, perfectly captured the season's spirit of generosity.

On December 23 2017, 160 families and 700 children received gifts of food, household goods, groceries and presents at the Glen Innes School venue which hosted the event.

Each child received a present, and youngsters spent time in the play area enjoying face-painting, bouncy castles, popcorn and candy floss, special treats from Cafe2U and ice-creams from Mr Whippy.

Recognising that the donations far exceeded anything else they may have received throughout the year, Christmas Store 2017 elicited a heartfelt response from those who received.

Steve Farrelly, an elder at St Columba Presbyterian, is the founder and general manager of Breakfast Club, a community outreach of Zion Ministries Trust, supported by St Columba Presbyterian in Botany. The annual Christmas Store initiative grew out of that club some three years ago, evolving from an annual banquet for about 600 people.

Steve describes the feedback from the families at Christmas Store 2017 as "very emotional".

"Many of the families struggle to come to terms with everything being free, donated by complete strangers. They are used to 'food donations' but nothing like what they received on that day," Steve says. "The children were cautious at first as they also struggled to accept that everything was free, and the volunteers found the whole event quite emotional."

There is much about the Christmas Store that makes it special. A massive effort goes into fundraising beforehand, and the event involves many months of hard work, spearheaded by Steve and his crew.

A total of \$20,000 was raised for Christmas Store 2017. About half of that came from the St Columba congregation and the rest from those who had supported the 2016 event, many of whom chose to increase their donations from the previous year.

As fundraising got underway, school principals and social workers worked to identify families in need. This year, 160 families were

invited to participate, drawn from Glen Innes School, Glen Taylor School, St Pius X School, Tamaki Primary School, Te Kohanga School, Leabank Primary and Vaka Tautua Charity.

Everything on the day was offered 'free of charge' and help was provided by a team of 50 volunteers, 12 of them from St Columba.

Steve says the volunteers help run the various food and grocery stands inside the hall. Purchased for the 2017 stalls were items such as corned beef cans, frozen vegetables, cans of coconut cream, vermicelli, oyster sauce, 160 legs of lamb, watermelon, ice cream, hot dogs and sweets. Among the items donated were cereals, food bank groceries, potatoes and onions, dessert hampers, toiletries, baby items, toys, a range of sweets and 200 Christmas hampers, for which Christmas Store had paid a koha.

The families were given a choice of what they wanted.

Steve says social workers remained with the families while they chose goods, as many found being given about \$500 worth of items for free quite emotional.

"That is why the last stand was watermelon and Tip Top vanilla, they could eat and relax prior to going outside with the children."

Event organisers also make sure as many people as possible are assisted through Christmas Store, and go to some lengths to ensure no-one feels left out on the day.

"Every hour only one of the schools attended, so the children were amongst friends, as were the parents," Steve explains. "Some families rang the school principals about 'missing out', and in all of those cases we found a spot for them."

As the popularity of Christmas Store grows, so are plans to increase the scale of the event each year. Steve says three additional schools were added in 2017, and the number of families invited from Glen Innes and Glen Taylor went from 20 to 30.

"It is not necessarily that the need has grown, rather than our ability to service the need has increased.

"In 2018, we intend increasing the families attending to 200, and the number of children to 1000. We are expecting to have to raise \$27,000 to do that."

Viv Posselt **Spanz**