

HELPING CHILDREN

# Drive looks to brighten Christmas of hurricane victims

Operation Secret Santa Port Saint Joe in the final stages

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BROOKSVILLE — In 2014, Erin Cochran Daly traveled to her hometown, Breezy Point, New York, after Hurricane Sandy caused catastrophic damage there. The storm was the worst in New York history, lingering for four days and causing massive destruction.

Operation Breezy Gut and Pump, as the cleanup project was named, restored neighborhoods most effected. Breezy Point is still recovering four years later.

"There was a lot of damage and destruction in my own hometown," Daly, a Hernando County special prosecutor, said. "But I was super lucky. My house was still there."

Her gratitude morphed into compassion when Hurricane Michael left similar destruction to many communities along Florida's vulnerable Panhandle. Daly assisted a collection and delivery campaign, bringing filled gas cans and supplies to areas of Port St. Joe, near Mexico Beach, shortly after the storm hit.

"These people, their families



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

Toys collected during Operation Secret Santa Port Saint Joe will be delivered on Dec. 14.

were devastated," she said.

Breezy Point is still recovering after four years. "And they are much better off financially than the Panhandle."

In Port Saint Joe, families are living in tents, she said. And the children, understandably, pulled at her heart strings. "If I could just do something to make their lives easier."

Now she is returning, almost two months later, to help restore the magic of Christmas.

Operation Secret Santa Port

Saint Joe is in its final stages of fulfilling Christmas wishes for effected children of Hurricane Michael. And it is happening because of the generosity of the local Hernando County community. "The support has been overwhelming," Daly said.

The toy drive was spearheaded by Rich Russell, Hernando County Emergency Management coordinator, and his wife, Barbara, Daly said. The three had worked together during the first trip that brought necessary supplies.

For years Daly has built

strong connections with outstanding citizens in the community, all willing to jump on board. "They trust me," she said. "They know if they give me \$100, I'm going to spend it on toys."

The outpouring of support has been incredible. As many as 30 collection boxes have been dropped at locations throughout the county. Those wishing to help should bring a new, unwrapped toy into one of the participating locations. A list can be obtained through Operation Secret Santa Port



Erin Cochran Daly has been helping collect toys after seeing Hurricane Michael's destruction in Port Saint Joe with her own eyes. Brian Alvarez of Brian's Place in Hernando Beach eagerly jumped onboard.

Saint Joe on Facebook. There is also an Amazon wish list where donors can shop for specific items.

As the toys are collected, they are organized according to age and gender and stored in a warehouse. All donations should be wrapped up by the deadline of Dec. 10.

The toys are scheduled for delivery to Port Saint Joe on Dec. 14, with distribution to children on Dec. 15.

Organizers are working out the details with authorities for how they will be distributed. "They usually do their own toy

drive," Daly explained, "but they're kind of busy."

The generosity of her community has been overwhelming, she added.

She remembered a little 3-year old girl she had met during her first trip to Port Saint Joe after Michael. "Her name was Izzy," Daly said. "Her parents are fire fighters."

The little girl clearly impacted Daly, igniting that need to help Santa restore hope. "She had no shoes," Daly remembered. "She just wanted to go home but she had no home."