

Help is Here for Back to School

Palace Gardens Residents Start New Tradition

BY CHARLIE HUDSON

Art classes have long been popular among residents of The Palace Gardens in Homestead and Terri Dawkins, owner of Mud Puddle Ceramics, has been teaching at the multiple Palace locations for almost ten years.

Last fall, she proposed an idea which was quickly accepted. The residents would sell their paintings, drawings, and crafted items to fund a back-to-school give-away with a goal of helping twenty students. A new spark was added to the group; a spark that culminated in a lively afternoon Friday, July 29, 2022, where festive balloons, music, and much more awaited the students and families who joined the residents.

An important step to make the idea work was to partner with a non-profit organization and Dawkins contacted Homestead Councilman Larry Roth, well known for his 501(c)3, This Is For The Kids, Inc., and other community involvement. The residents knew they could turn to family and friends to make purchases and it grew from there.

Word spread and approximately \$4,000 was raised in sales through social media and some events around town. Several donations were also added in. The artists are in their 80s and 90s, and many can no longer comfortably be physically out.

As interest in their efforts and sales increased, so did their feeling of being more connected to the community.

In preparation for the give-away, Councilman Roth reached out to various schools and children/family-focused non-profits to identify twenty students of different ages who would receive a Google Chrome tablet and a backpack filled with school supplies.

In the meantime, plans were underway to make the day even better to feature a buffet, music, a bounce house,



Palace Gardens resident Mary Lou Audrey presented 10-year-old Nalanee Pérez with a Google Chrome tablet and a supply-filled backpack.

access to the swimming pool, and an ice cream truck.

"I'm just facilitating," Alexandra Urdaneta, Director of Activities, said in her remarks and gestured to the three tables of residents who were the artists and other donors. "They spent the past eight months raising funds and this is all on them."

Councilman Roth had been wanting to find an opportunity to put seniors together with children. He spoke briefly about coming occasionally to watch the residents create their pieces. "They would light up," he said in talking with the artists during his visits.

Jane Silva, a teacher for thirty-five years, was the first resident to address the families. "You children have a special place in my heart, especially third-graders." She explained how the group of nearly two dozen residents had voted unanimously for the project

and how much it meant to all of them to be able to share in the day.

Each student was called up individually with a designated resident to present the tablet and backpack. For those who could not maneuver to the front of the room, the student went to the table to exchange smiles and some hugs.

Deby Cohn, also a teacher of first, second, and fifth grades who, "graduated to teaching Kindergarten," said the group had prepared a surprise. She led them in singing the classic song, "School Days," and invited everyone to sing along or at least hum.

The excitement extended well after as the children and families mingled to learn more about the residents and enjoyed the activities. With the success of this first year, the plan is to double the number next year to help forty children.