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Never before had 77 children had the privilege to be a part of the program. This year's giving was incredible, a tribute to the Blairsville-Union County community and beyond, Blairsville Police Chief Johnny Carroll said.

"In year's past, we've been able to take 40 or so kids on this adventure, and last year, we took 61," Chief Carroll said. "This year, the money came from everywhere, from locals and local businesses to folks reading the North Georgia News online and seeing that we needed donations."

Saturday began with the children and their parents arriving at the Blairsville Civic Center and filling out the Shop With A Cop paperwork. The parents then left the children with Blairsville and Union County's finest.

But before they left, they took with them a food basket complete with everything necessary for a Christmas dinner. It's one of the rarest twists to any Shop With A Cop programs statewide.

Also, more than 50 volunteers from area churches showed up to help Chief Carroll and his troops complete its annual Christmas mission.

"We couldn't do what we do today without these volunteers," Baxter said. "They are the heart and soul of Shop With A Cop. They're in with us on this mission of making Christmas happen for all these boys and girls that make up Shop With



Blairsville Police officers get a glad handshake during the 14th Annual Shop With A Cop at Wal-Mart. Photo/Lowell Nicholson

A Cop."

"We've just touched the tip of the iceberg," Chief Carroll said. "I don't know anyone in this community that enjoys watching a child do without on Christmas. What we saw this year was just absolutely incredible with the number of folks volunteering, the amount of donations received and the Joy we get to share with this program, we're making a difference one child at a time."

Each December, along with the support of numerous individuals and businesses throughout the county, the dedicated and civic minded police officers and staff, working in conjunction with the Union County Family Connection, the Union County School System, and now, the Union County Sheriff's Office, take young people on a Christmas shop-

ping trip.

In addition, Wal-Mart not only welcomes the annual shoppers, "they also assist the program through donations, and helping the children of this county," Baxter said.

Cindy Byers, a longtime volunteer with Shop With A Cop, said "the kids that are selected for this shopping event truly deserve it because there are so many times shopping with these kids, that you will see them purchasing things for other family members, or for the house, and even in one instance, a teen was shopping, and the only items picked were food items, so that this child could bring food home to the rest of the family."

This year's event included 24 active duty law enforcement officers, eight retired, and around 50 community volun-

teers.

Special thanks to the Blairsville Cruisers who, in addition to helping with Shop With A Cop, sponsored 24 other children for Christmas.

Wayne Tanner, president of the Blairsville Cruisers, said through the hard work and dedication of club members, "more than \$12,000 was raised," which has been divided up and half went to Shop With A Cop, while the other half was presented to other groups that help children with special needs.

For these youths who otherwise might not receive a Christmas, providing them with a day of shopping, and money to spend, is a rare treat. And, the children realize that it took a generous community to join together to bring Christmas to everyone that went Shopping With A Cop.

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ers' Chuck Holloway, this event is the highlight of the year. That's when all of the work during the year pays off, when they finally get to take the kids shopping.

"This is what we work all year for," Holloway said. "When next year begins, we'll start working towards December all over again."

This charitable event has grown each year since 2007, and now the Cruisers hold events the first weekend of every month from April to October to support the programs. On Fridays, the Cruisers are at the Farmers Market, which has provided a tremendous boost

to the club.

"Having the pavilion and all the parking really helps us a lot," Tanner said. "With this year being the anniversary of the Mustang, we're hoping to find a 1965 or a 1966 Mustang that we can raffle off to give us more money for the kids. We don't know if that's going to happen, but we're trying."

As the kids began to scatter throughout Wal-Mart, Tanner and Holloway spoke about the chosen children who participate in the Shop With A Cruiser event.

"We go through the schools and the Department of Family and Children Ser-

vices to get a list of children and families who could use the assistance," Holloway said. "Some kids have a wish list, some of them don't. They are allowed so much money and there are a few things that they're not allowed to buy."

Tanner added that while there are some things the kids aren't allowed to buy, they have no influence over how they spend their money. At the end of the day, it's all about brightening their day and their holidays.

"We give them the money to enjoy themselves," Tanner said. "Just making them happy is the main thing."



Photos by Lowell Nicholson