

Judge Joseph Toia: Fostering the Holiday Spirit

“When I heard a child say, ‘You showed me that I mattered,’ I realized that we *can* change a life just by showing we care.”

So says one of Santa’s busiest helpers, who happens to live right in Macomb County.

Better known—since his appointment in 2015—as Macomb County Circuit Court Judge Joseph Toia, this holiday helper has given his time for 12 years toward making Christmas special for thousands of Michigan children every year who are living in foster care.

Judge Toia and his wife, Theresa, were inspired to begin this effort in 2006, after their daughter, who at the time was a foster care case worker for the Michigan Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS), mentioned that for the second year in a row, none of the children in her caseload received anything for Christmas. The next year, they provided Christmas presents for 47 children in foster care.

However, once they delivered the wrapped presents to DHHS, they learned that there were more than 1200 kids in foster care that year, most of whom would not receive any gifts. In fact, one of the older kids said, “On Christmas morning, I didn’t want to get out of bed.”

“We decided that could not happen again,” related Judge Toia.

He and his family reached out to family, friends, and other contacts for more support, and soon enough, the project became too big to continue out of their home. They were able to secure donated space through the generosity of local commercial property owners.”

In 2008, they officially founded Friends of Foster Kids, and in 2011, it was granted 501(c)(3) status. The effort has since grown to serve all kids living in foster care in Macomb County, Oakland County, and beyond. Working directly with DHHS and their volunteer network of “angels” helps to fill the gaps for children who have been removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect and placed in temporary housing or shelters, explains Judge Toia.

Over the past 12 years, approximately 180,000 gifts have been donated, wrapped, and delivered to more than 15,000 children living in foster care. After learning of other gaps in need, Friends of Foster Kids expanded its services to include providing immediate needs when children are first coming into foster care, as well as a graduate program to help children who are “aging out,” whether they are transitioning into college, the workforce, or independent living.

So how has this initiative benefited the community?

Judge Toia says that many of the kids who have been helped by Friends of Foster Kids have since graduated high school and/or college, and have begun careers. Some have come back to volunteer, or to speak on behalf of the program and share their stories.

A future goal for Friends of Foster Kids is to recruit local professionals to share their skills or provide services that directly benefit a child in foster care, such as orthodontics, legal help, scholarship opportunities, job searching, and more.

On why it's important for judges to give back, Judge Toia remarked, "Not many people have the chance to meet their judges outside the courtroom. If we lead by example, we can continue to help improve our communities and inspire the public we serve."