



A CRUZADER'S CHRISTMAS

Jun Dela Cruz and His Team Bring Christmas Spirit to the Homeless on L.A.'s Skid Row

Jun and Joyce Dela Cruz couldn't believe their eyes. In November 2000, they watched a disturbing television news report that changed their Christmas forever. Thousands of the more than 10,000 homeless on Los Angeles' Skid Row would be going without a Thanksgiving or Christmas meal that year. The normally replete corporate and individual donations were way down, leaving local shelters, located only about 1/2 mile from L.A.'s wealthy Wilshire business district, with only enough money to feed a few hundred of the city's neediest residents. Jun and Joyce watched as they showed normally stocked food banks filled with only a small amount of canned goods and a few sacks of rice. They saw the faces of the thousands of men, women and children who would go without food, clothing and shelter.

For the Dela Cruzs, the holidays that year were the furthest thing from happy. In October 2000, they had lost their baby daughter, Jasmine, and the idea of celebrating the holidays without her was heartbreaking. Jun and Joyce decided to work through their sorrow by doing something different that Thanksgiving. They were moved to honor their daughter's memory by giving hope to others, and helping the needy on Skid Row have a happier Thanksgiving seemed like a great way to do that. Jun, Joyce and their son, Justin, went to the local grocery store, packed their Suburban to the brim with food and toiletries, and drove from their Yorba Linda, Calif. home to one of the local L.A. missions. After unloading the food donations, Jun handed a \$2,500 cash donation to a local mission worker who said thank you and put it in his pocket. "It was the funniest feeling for me to hand the guy \$2,500 bucks and not know whether it was going to go to the shelter or to his pocket," Jun says. Both Jun and Joyce felt really uncomfortable with the exchange. As they drove through the streets on the way home and saw dozens of shelters closed and hundreds of people on the streets, they decided they wanted to take matters into their own hands and give the food and supplies directly to the men, women and children in need.

For the next month, the couple motivated their business team members, family and friends to donate money and food for the cause. In the wee hours of that

Christmas morning, Jun and Joyce loaded two SUVs with generous contributions of food, toiletries and clothing, and set out for L.A. They parked on a local street in the heart of Skid Row and brought Christmas spirit to hundreds of the area's homeless by handing them the much-needed supplies along with McDonald's gift certificates for a hot holiday meal. "We felt really good by the time we left because we felt this was actually something that was going to work," Jun says. And work it has. Christmas 2007, marked the seventh year Jun and his team have celebrated Christmas morning with the homeless on Skid Row. Jun and Joyce's grassroots effort has grown into a community project with more than 450 volunteers. Several local [World Financial Group](#) leaders and their teams, including John Pham, David Pham, Armando Gil, Bobby Garcia, Kalani Vale and Patrick Bet-David heard about Jun's Skid Row Christmas project and got involved. Jun receives the four moving trucks the project now requires at cost from a local rental company. Area merchants sell Jun and his team toys, sleeping bags, blankets, clothing and supplies at deep discounts. A local bread company gives them day-old bread for free. All of the teams accept donations of food, clothing, toiletries and money in November and December and warehouse the items in their offices. The weeks leading up to Christmas, the volunteers sort all of the donations, make toiletry kits for men and women, and wrap toys for the children. After midnight mass on Christmas Eve, Jun, Joyce and the volunteers gather at his office to make thousands of sandwiches and food packages. At 6:30 a.m., the fully loaded trucks lead a caravan of more than 200 cars to the same side street in L.A. to off load the goods. Jun and the teams have the effort down to a science, with each truck distributing either food, clothing, or toiletries.

Orange cones help to form the lines, and they make sure each child that comes gets a toy. In addition to dispensing items from the trucks, volunteers also give out hugs and spend time talking and connecting with the people so they know they matter. When their work is done by 8:30 a.m., all of the volunteers go to the same Chinese restaurant every year – the owner keeps it open for them – and they start their Christmas day with a nice meal together.

"The same people expect us every year now," Jun says. "Usually at Christmas you are so used to receiving, and people tend to forget that Christmas isn't about receiving, it's about giving."

But the giving is not only for the homeless, but also from them. Jun, the volunteers and even their children have learned valuable lessons about what's important in life from the experience. A few years ago, Jun met a man on the line who told him he used to give food out to the homeless. He had been an attorney in downtown L.A. who lost his job, his license and his family, and had nowhere to go but the streets. One year, a volunteer ended up connecting with an old high school classmate whose family had found themselves homeless after their father passed away and they were left with nothing. Several years ago, when Jun's son, Justin, was five, he came out on his first charity Christmas with his family. As Jun drove closer to their destination, Justin, used to the comforts of their upscale

home, asked why all of these people lived in cardboard boxes. When they began distributing the food and clothing, Justin clung to his father's leg, and held tight to the Power Ranger toy he'd wanted that he'd opened on Christmas Eve. He started talking to a little boy in line and then started to play with him. As Jun packed his family up to go home, Justin begged his father to stop the car. He ran out and gave the little boy his coveted Power Ranger toy, got in the car, and was quiet for the rest of the day. Justin, who normally can't wait to open Christmas gifts, didn't even want to open any more presents when he got home. "In our household, Christmas has changed quite a bit," Jun says.

Jun is considering starting a foundation in his daughter's name and making this project an official charity event. But at the same time, he doesn't want to lose touch with the people and the grassroots feeling of it all. "This gives people a direct connect. You know people are getting the donations because you can give it out yourself," he says. "And it gives the people hope to know there are good people out there who care about them."

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