

Hundreds of children celebrate Christmas in Northridge

Santa Claus and Dignity Health Northridge Hospital Medical Center make students at five elementary schools happy



Students from five elementary schools received gifts and met Santa. Credit: PHOTOS: JORGE LUIS MACÍAS | Impremedia

By **Jorge Luis Macías** / Special for [La Opinion](#)

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For the 23rd consecutive year, officials and staff at Dignity Health Hospital Medical Center (NHMC) and Northridge Hospital Foundation hosted their 23rd annual “Helping Hands Holiday Jam” for more than 325 low-income children.

“As a hospital, we are blessed to serve the community,” said Brian Hammel, president of the NHMC Foundation. “For so many years we have received the

help of some community partners to bring joy to children who, perhaps, could have been left without a Christmas celebration like us.”

Through the foundation, five Title I “No Child Left Behind” elementary schools were selected, where students have free breakfast and lunch for disadvantaged people.

The selected elementary schools were: Parthenia Elementary School in Northridge; Cantara Elementary, and Blythe Street Elementary School, both in the city of Reseda, as well as Panorama City, and Michelle Obama elementary schools, both in Panorama City.

“We thought that for the children to have a complete Christmas, maybe it would be good to treat them to hot dogs with tomato sauce, French fries, cotton candy, churros and a hot chocolate,” Hammel told La Opinión.

Over the past 23 years, Dignity Health Hospital Medical Center (NHMC) and Northridge Hospital Foundation have donated more than 60,000 toys to the nearly 8,000 children who have attended the celebration.

This year, in addition to the hundreds of children from across the San Fernando Valley who were invited to this Christmas wonderland, the California State University Northridge (CSUN) softball and women's basketball and baseball and men's basketball teams were in attendance to help make the children's experience unforgettable.

“This is my third year volunteering,” said Shaylan Whatman of the Cal State University Northridge women's softball team. “It's beautiful to see the children smile. I love it”.



CSUN students participated in the event.



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“I really like watching children play; When I was younger I had never had anything like this,” said Xavier Ríos, a college baseball player. “We also had a lot of fun; “I’m glad we were able to help.”

The hospital parking lot became Santa's workshop, with carnival games, crafts, food, a photo and visit with Santa Claus, and a bag full of gifts and school supplies for each of the little ones.

“I've been dressing like Santa Claus for five years,” said Fred Davis, 76, who worked at Dignity Health hospital for 42 years.



“Santa Claus” arrived in a car from the Northridge Fire Department and caused excitement among the hundreds of students, who had the opportunity to greet and hug him personally, in addition to taking a photo.

“My heart fills with joy to see the children's happy faces,” said Mr. Davis.

To raise awareness among all attendees about the need to collaborate in solidarity and be part of the children's happiness, Brian Hammel told the students of Cal State University Northridge the story of a boy who kept his hot dog.

“He asked permission to take him home to his little brother,” he said. “That broke my soul, and from that moment on I thought I had to continue with the Christmas celebration for the children.”

“That is the reason why we never have problems getting volunteers for this event, young and old,” he added. “We might have had a second-grader who has a brother or sister at home and wants to bring them something. All of this touches all of our hearts because in reality that boy or girl is not thinking only of himself. He is thinking about his family.”

Thinking about the children's happiness was also the feeling that came over Cheryl Witt Wheelock, chief nursing executive at Dignity Health Hospital Medical Center in Northridge.

“I have been working for this hospital for 32 years and it is impressive what Brian Hammel started 23 years ago,” he said. “A happy Christmas on the face of every child makes me feel very good.”

Indeed, Dyland, a child from Michelle Obama Elementary, was super excited to see Santa Claus and raised his hands to want to touch him.

Meanwhile, little Sebastian and Iurii, from Blythe Elementary, enjoyed their hot chocolate and drew a sheet titled “Breakfast with Santa!”



“Every time I return to volunteer, I feel the connection to the Northridge Hospital Foundation again,” said Mary Grim, the administrative director of the Board of Directors. “It's important to me to give back to the community and the place where I had a wonderful career.”