

DAILY COMMERCIAL

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'It's a struggle, and it's scary'

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It wasn't easy for Allison Pfeiffer to tell her son there'd be no Christmas presents this year.

"At this time of year, how could you tell a child that?" asked Pfeiffer. "It hurts me not being able to give to him."

Lacking money for presents, Pfeiffer is trying to teach her son that the holiday season centers around family and friends and not the frenzied consumer spending culture that has grown to define it.

That's why during tough economic times some families fall back on their faith, family and friends. It's not the gifts that are important but the creation of new memories and sharing of old ones.

Without the usual festive accoutrements, a potpourri of family and consumer traditions, the holiday season seems grim.

Hundreds of families in Lake County are struggling to find food, let alone extra cash to buy gifts this year. Rising unemployment, surging food prices and record high energy prices in the last two years has decreased disposable income.

Pfeiffer leans heavily on her faith and church. The church helped Pfeiffer through a difficult time in her life.

Pfeiffer works in housekeeping and maintenance at the Christian Care Center. The center is the community outreach arm of First Baptist Church Leesburg, which administers aide to families and individuals who need food, shelter, and counseling. It's a good job, said Pfeiffer, but it's often not enough to pay all of her bills - groceries, utilities and daycare. The lights are usually the first to go.

"I have to choose. What do I pay this week?" said Pfeiffer. "It's a struggle, and it's scary."

The center had helped Pfeiffer get back on her feet after the birth of her son Jordan. Like any four-year old boy, a Batman action figure and a helicopter only top the list of toys Jordan wants for Christmas.

"What doesn't he want," said Pfeiffer. "There isn't anything more in the world that I want to do than to give him a Christmas."

Pfeiffer isn't waiting for Christmas but starting with Thanksgiving. A few friends from Christian Care's women's center and their children joined Pfeiffer and her son for dinner and a movie on turkey day.

"They had nowhere to go for Thanksgiving," said Pfeiffer.

With a little help for the local food bank, a donated turkey and a few deserts Pfeiffer said she made punctuates the spirit of holiday giving.

It's teaching Jordan to "appreciate life" and "make the best out of everything," she said.

Lake County resident Amy Priest stood in the food assistance line at the Salvation Army headquarters with her three kids more than a week before Thanksgiving. She and her husband recently separated. He lost his job and she's looking for a job. Some people, like Priest, are applying for holiday food assistance for the first time.

"I don't know if we're going to have anything," Priest said. "Thank God we're going to have food; toys this year is another problem."

With a little luck, Priest said she hopes have a couple of presents under the tree waiting for the kids on Christmas morning.

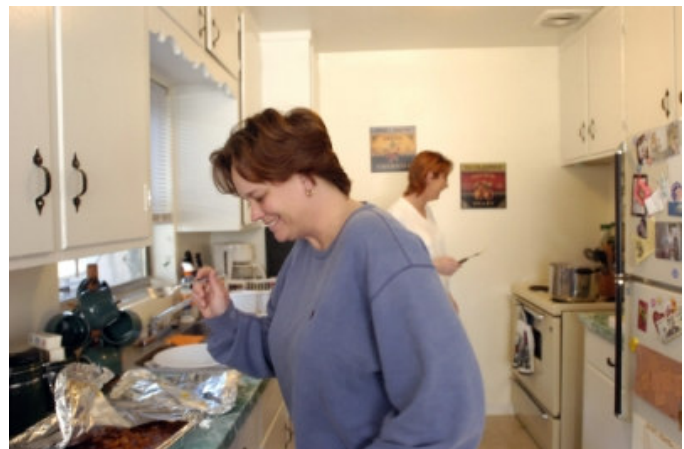
Tommy Daniels, of Leesburg, is unemployed. He was a restaurant dishwasher before he was let go a few months ago.

"It's been hard right now," he said. "The economy is down. It's hard for everybody."

With the food basket Daniels expects to get from The Father's House Christian Center and help from the Salvation Army, Thanksgiving and Christmas should be good for two children. Even though he doesn't intend to buy as much this year, Daniels said family and friends will get the children plenty of clothes and toys for the holiday.

Daniels said he even volunteered to be a bell ringer this year for the Salvation Army. The Army hires bell ringers every year because volunteers are in short supply.

"So I can give my kids something more, said Daniels. "I'm just hoping they'll have the best Christmas this year."



Allison Pfeifer and Jordon with Candace Wilson and Caleb Zimmer.

Shae Zimmer at Allison Pfeifer's for Thanksgiving '08

