

This is Chris Barela Nystrom of Boys & Girls Club of the Redwoods with today's community comment. This is a busy time of year. Retailers are all duking it out for our final dollar, our employers are busy organizing the company holiday party, and our relatives are debating over everything from 'what do we get mom and dad for Christmas' to whose house we all pack into and the terrible call the ref made in the game.

But even in all of the craziness, most people reflect on this time of year with fond, joyous memories. With all the stress and checklists and running around to prepare for another wonderful holiday with family, it's easy to forget that this time of year isn't a happy occasion for everyone.

Being involved with Boys & Girls Club, I've been able to witness the stories of some truly remarkable kids, in unremarkable circumstances. Like 7-year-old Julie.

A few years ago, when I started working with the Club, our teens hosted a family dinner night. They worked hard all afternoon, preparing a feast for those teens, parents and young children that would be coming in for a hot meal and some community bonding. Julie's older brother was a member at our Teen Center at the time. When I first interacted with Julie, she was shy, not wanting to share much...though I did manage to get her to crack a smile for a corny Christmas joke.

As I went around the room greeting people, ~~and assisting our teens where I could,~~ I noticed Julie was sitting at a table by herself, no parents or other siblings were there with her. She'd finished half of her plate of food, then sat there, as if not sure what to do next.

I walked over and ~~asked if everything was okay. Motioning to the half-finished~~ ^{motioned} chicken and green beans, ~~she~~ said "oh, green beans are my favorite, do you not like'em?" Very quietly she told me she was saving them. I was confused, so I prodded a bit more. She opened up to tell me she wanted to bring them home to her little brother.

Pause

I told her to go ahead and finish all that she wants, and that I would make a special to-go box for her to take home.

I came to learn that this was a more common scene than I anticipated. You see, Julie is among the 10% of young people that come into our Club whose families don't have stable housing. Stability is something I've always taken for granted. I've always had a roof over my head. I've always had food in the cupboard...even if it was only Ramen in my college days.

Boys & Girls Club of the Redwoods serves thousands of youth every year. If 10% of the kids we see in our daily after-school programs are lacking stable housing, surely many more are lacking other vitally important things to be successful.

Working with the Club this time of year, I'm reminded of how generous our North Coast community truly is. ~~The Association of Relators provides toys through their annual drive to ensure our kids get a gift. Danco hosts a party for nearly 100 of our elementary youth. And just this year, Benchmark Realty's coat drive brought in nearly 400 brand new coats to ensure kids are staying warm this winter!~~

This is
~~These are the reasons I got involved with the Club, to make a child's life a little bit better. To help give them the extra support they need to learn, be healthy and grow into productive citizens. Every day at our Club, kids are being given the tools they need to succeed. To graduate high school. To be active in their community. To simply learn how to get along with others. But it takes all of us to reach the thousands of young people who need us most.~~

So take a moment this time of year to be involved with the community. Make a donation. Volunteer. Or simply share our story with your friends and family. ~~When we all work together, the community wins.~~ Find out how you can be involved by calling the Club at 707-441-1030, or easily give a donation to help our local kids at GiveBGC.org

This has been Chris Barela Nystrom with Boys & Girls Club of the Redwoods for the Community Comment.