



# UMB News

## CEC's COVID-Safe Christmas Store Spreads Cheer

**December 21, 2020** | By [Jena Frick](#)

Even a global pandemic cannot stop the spread of holiday cheer. On Dec. 11-12, the [University of Maryland, Baltimore's](#) (UMB) [Office of Community Engagement](#) found a way to bring its annual Christmas store to neighbors in West Baltimore.

Thanks to a partnership between UMB's [Community Engagement Center](#) (CEC) and the [Foundry Church](#), organizers set up a tented, outdoor toy store that allowed parents and caregivers the opportunity to buy new gifts for their loved ones at deeply discounted prices.

"Our goal is really to make parents the heroes of Christmas this year," said Lindsay Ferguson, director of outreach and operations at the Foundry Church. "Our customers can come and shop and find gifts that are mostly between \$1 and \$5, which is a really great, affordable price, but they get the dignity of saying, 'I picked this out myself.'"

To maintain [COVID-19 safety protocols](#), shoppers had to reserve a time slot to enter the store. Then they were able to do their holiday shopping one at a time in 15-minute intervals. All of the shoppers and volunteers wore masks, had their temperature checked, and used hand sanitizer before entering the store.



"This year has been extremely challenging for everyone," said **Ashley Valis, MSW**, executive director of strategic initiatives and community engagement for UMB. "Couple that with the fact that there are not a lot of holiday toy drives this year because of the pandemic, and that really put the pressure on us to find a way to pull this off

*Demeter, a West Baltimore community member, picks out the perfect dolls to give to her two daughters for Christmas.*

for the  
community this  
year.”

After a year of unprecedented challenges due to the global crisis, West Baltimore neighbors were thrilled to see this holiday tradition continue.

“Without this store, I have nothing for Christmas, so this is really going to help my family,” said Patrina Wallet, a West Baltimore community member. She was happy to find a table full of new Legos sets this year. “My son loves Legos. He will build a whole house out of these on Christmas morning!”

At the dolls table, Demeter, another member of the community, was picking out a couple of Barbie dolls for her two daughters.

“We really appreciate this store a lot,” she said. “It’s a great bargain and helps everybody in the neighborhood during this time. With people’s hours getting cut and some people not working at all, this is a great help, and we all appreciate it.”

This annual Christmas store is a gift that keeps on giving, because all of the money collected at the store goes directly back into the West Baltimore community.

“We love this neighborhood, and we want to see it flourish,” Ferguson said. “All of our proceeds are going to go back to organizations who support young people here in Southwest Baltimore, so when you shop not only do you help be a hero to your own kids, but you become a hero to your neighborhood as well, which is really cool and powerful.”

Opening the Christmas store put an extra feeling of holiday cheer in the air. When the pandemic unfolded, the CEC had to move the majority of its programming to virtual platforms. This made it difficult for neighbors to stay connected over the last year. Seeing each other in person for the first time in a long time was exciting for everyone and emotional for some.

“We have not really been able to see our community members for quite some time,” Valis said as her voice cracked and she began to tear up. “To be here today and just see people from a distance and knowing that we are open and here for them and their families feels amazing. We’ve missed everyone. We’ve missed our neighbors, and they’re our family. Even though we can’t give anyone a hug today, I think it just shows our commitment to the community and how happy we are to be able to do this.”

Behind the scenes, many holiday helpers worked together to bring a COVID-safe store to the neighborhood in a short period of time. The efforts were led by Ferguson and **Camille Givens-Patterson**, UMB’s community partnership specialist, who are grateful for the support they received from the Foundry Church and UMB communities.

“I would really like to say thank you to the volunteers from the community, the Foundry Church of Baltimore, the pediatric residents at the University of Maryland Medical Center, the folks from UMB’s Office of Communications and Public Affairs, and our staff at the CEC [**Tyrone Roper**, **Madison Haas**, and Valis] for giving their time and ‘muscle’ to make this year’s Christmas Store a success!” Givens-Patterson said.

With the new CEC building ready and waiting to be opened, UMB faculty and staff are eager for the time when it will be safe to welcome community members back so they can use the new facility and its wonderful amenities. In the meantime, they plan to keep the outdoor tent in the back parking lot so they can host other events and workshops using COVID-19 safety protocols.

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