

Annual Christmas Store Spreads Holiday Cheer

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This holiday season, Eris Vagley was hoping to find LOL Dolls to give to her two daughters for Christmas. LOL Dolls are one of the most popular holiday toys this year and cost about \$25 each, but Vagley was able to purchase one for each daughter along with an armful of other gifts for a total of \$39.

The deeply discounted gifts were bought at the annual Christmas Store set up in the basement of the University of Maryland, Baltimore's (UMB) Community Engagement Center (CEC) on Dec. 10-11. The store is a partnership between UMB and Foundry Church to give West Baltimore families an opportunity to buy toys and other holiday gifts at reduced prices.

"It's amazing that everyone can come together and make it affordable for low-income families to give their children the gifts they really want," Vagley said. "It's amazing, and it's definitely spreading the holiday spirit in a way you don't see very often."





West Baltimore neighbors browse the toy selection at the annual Christmas Store, set up by Foundry Church and UMB's Community Engagement Center.

Unlike many toy drives that happen around the holidays, UMB's Christmas Store works directly with parents so that they can hand-pick toys and gifts for their loved ones. Lindsay Ferguson, the operations and outreach pastor at Foundry Church, worked with UMB's Office of Community Engagement (OCE) to organize the annual store. She says that this model allows parents to be the "heroes of Christmas."

"A few years ago, we looked at different Christmas toy collection and distribution models and realized that a lot of times they bypass the parents in the process," Ferguson said. "So we thought, 'What if we partnered with parents and help them be the ones who pick out the toys instead?' This way, they get to come in, they get to buy gifts, and they get the joy and the dignity of saying, 'I picked this out. I bought it with my own money. And it's a way to show my love for my kids.'"

All the gifts in the store are marked down to a third or a quarter of their regular retail price, and most of them cost between \$1 and \$5. Everything was donated by members

of the UMB and Foundry Church communities through monetary donations and gift registries. Ferguson says that word about the Christmas Store has spread, and they received donations from all over the country this year.

In addition to the gifts for sale, the Maryland Book Bank set up shop in the Christmas Store. Every shopper who passed through could pick out a book for each of their children and a holiday-themed book to read as a family at no charge.

This is the eighth year that the Christmas Store has set up shop at the CEC, and it is a gift that keeps on giving. All the money spent by community members at the store goes into a fund that will purchase gifts to stock the store next year.

“We love being a part of this community,” Ferguson said. “So many people that come to us say this is the only way they can be able to afford Christmas, and this is the only way that I can make sure that we have presents this year. We’re just really glad and grateful to be giving back and providing this resource to our community.”

For Vagley, this was her third year shopping at the Christmas Store, and she plans to continue to be a part of it even after her children grow up.

“I love the environment, and it’s wonderful to know that the money I spend goes back into toys for someone else next year,” she said. “Once my children age out of toys at Christmas, I won’t be coming back to shop, but I will definitely be doing what I can to donate and help other families.”