

Submitted to the Glacier Reporter for the January 7<sup>th</sup> 2015 edition  
For pictures go to [www.americanindianpartnership.org](http://www.americanindianpartnership.org) and watch the slideshow on the homepage.

## 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Blackfeet Children Christmas Fund Expands, Fills Wish Lists

*By Gregg Paisley for the Glacier Reporter*

For Christmas 2014, the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Blackfeet Children Christmas Fund (a program of the American Indian Partnership) expanded in major ways and tried several new things. The results were extraordinary, targeting six categories of gift recipients and, for the first time ever, filling specific wish lists for children, families, and organizations.

In the previous four years, the Fund bought large quantities of good quality gifts that were age and gender appropriate –with no particular recipient in mind at the time of purchase-- and distributed them accordingly. In that respect, the Fund operated a little like Toys for Tots, except many of our gifts were generally higher value (e.g. Android tablets in 2013, bikes / Wiis / iPods / cameras / cell phones / etc. in 2010 - 2012).

From 2010 – 2013 these gifts were purchased and distributed mostly in the week following Christmas because we could stretch our budget farther with after-Christmas sales and markdowns in Great Falls and Kalispell, and volunteers were more readily available.

So it was with great trepidation we tried something in 2014 that seemed liable to fail for all sorts of reasons: We decided to go meet children, families, and organizations in the weeks leading up to Christmas, get their wish lists, and have the gifts under the tree by December 23<sup>rd</sup>. In that sense, we shifted from a “Toys for Tots” model to a “Make a Wish” model.

But our Mission Statement includes the phrase: “We go about our work with a good heart and pure spirit, and the Creator does the rest.” That hope was once again realized in 2014. Everything fell into place better and faster than anyone expected, the money to fulfil wish lists showed up just in time, and the results were spectacular.

Here are the six groups we served. First, we always give special attention to the Nurturing Center, a wonderful, safe, loving, well-kept, homey place, with a dedicated staff looking after a large, ever-changing assemblage of children from infants to age 17. We had given them outdoor play equipment earlier in 2014 (swings, slide, etc.) but that doesn’t do much for the little kids or when it’s too cold to go outside. So we asked what they could use and they wanted various push cars and toys, Little Tykes foot power cars, pedal cars and trikes, electric ride around cars, etc. to cover ages 1 – 5 years. To

keeps kids from 5 – 17 amused and playing together we gave them both an Xbox and Wii and extra remotes, with a variety of games to cover all ages and interests. We also ordered some larger Big Wheels / Green Machines / etc. for older kids to use outside when the weather warms up, as well as additional outdoor play equipment (climbing dome, teeter totter) and will deliver and assemble that stuff when the weather turns. They also asked if we could buy them a number of nice blankets to give to children when they arrive and take with them when they eventually leave. Fortunately there were good quantities available locally so we met the vendor and wrote a check that day.

Second, we gave many major gifts to Browning-area children, families, and group homes. Most of these recipients were identified by asking federal and tribal case workers (who often then asked school, police, and caregivers) to identify those in need, but a dozen or so referrals came to us from other sources. Recipients ranged from individual children on their own and in between homes to families or group homes with 4, 6, up to 9 children, usually being raised by a single parent, grandparent, or foster parent(s). In every case, we made a list of what each child wanted for Christmas, as well as other details, for example if the household had a TV with video inputs or game console or internet access or a PC. From this list we decided that in many cases the best way to give families gifts that would benefit all the kids and promote family time would be to give them a Wii or Xbox game console, a wi fi tablet, and then give each kid over 5 an age / gender suitable video game, and give the younger kids toys. So for many families we ended up assembling a “Christmas in a Box” –a big box containing numerous wrapped gifts ready to lay out under the tree: a game console with extra remotes / cables / batteries, Android tablet, video games or toys for each child, Santa hats, gloves, popcorn in a big Christmasy tin, and root beer or sparkling cider. For families that already had those things, we got whatever else the child asked for: bicycles, Barbies, Hot Wheels, Dr. Dre Beats ear buds, cell phones, and countless other items.

(btw, For those that got game consoles and video games, everything has a one year warranty and Wendy Bremner at the federal building has all the gift receipts if you need a warranty replacement or repair.)

Third, we called down to Heart Butte schools to help us identify children, family, and group homes to do the same things we did around Browning.

Fourth, we covered special cases that weren't Christmas gifts. For example, we got a referral about a young girl who would be appearing in a school play the next day but didn't have a suitable dress to wear. In talking to the aunt we found they had seen the dress they wanted at Faught's Blackfeet Trading Post but didn't have money to buy it. So we called the store and paid for it by credit card over the phone and the family went in to pick up the dress. All that took maybe an hour from us first hearing about it to picking up the dress. We never met either the girl or the family, though we heard she was delighted and looked adorable in her new dress.

Fifth, we gave a game console and remotes, assorted video games, and an Android tablet to KBWG for a drawing for their Adopt a Kid program.

Sixth, we took toys up to the hospital so nurses and doctors could give them to children staying there. This was especially gratifying for me because I personally am deeply grateful to Blackfeet Community Hospital. Last year I was awakened in the middle of the night by great pain so drove myself six blocks to the hospital, crawled into the Emergency triage office and instantly passed out. Hospital staff revived me but evidently the requisite surgeon would take time to get there. Happily full of morphine, I told them no problem, I could wait. They told me yes problem, I couldn't wait, and an ambulance was on the way. I eventually awoke in Kalispell Regional where the doctors told me had I got there much later I might have woken up dead from an impressively burst appendix. So thanks to the Indian Health Service and Blackfeet Community Hospital and the subsequent emergency care they arranged, my children still have a father. That's a debt I was anxious to start chipping away at in 2014 and every year thereafter by sending gifts up to the hospital to brighten up the days of caregivers and the children in their care.

The Blackfeet Children Christmas Fund never asks if children or families are enrolled, descendants, or even Indians. We don't ask for last names --just childrens' first names so we can fill out tags on the gifts. We don't ask for or receive Blackfeet Tribal money or use any Tribal resources. Almost all our good hearted donors live off the reservation and most live outside Montana. These wonderful people give to children whose names they will never know and will never meet. That is the very definition of doing the right thing.

We have devised a new way to honor the kindness, good will, generosity, and year-after-year commitment of our many benefactors all over the world. In February in the Glacier Reporter we will take out an ad that lists everyone who donated this holiday season up through 1/31/15. Moreover we will list these donors under a monetary bracket that reflects their donations over the entire five years. Thus, for example, a donor who has donated \$25 a year each year will be listed in the "\$100 and up" bracket and a donor that has donated \$100 each year will be list in the "\$500 and up" bracket.