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Homeless get holiday help from DLA Piper

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Unwrapping a Christmas gift of socks and underwear may draw stares of disappointment from some teenagers.

But that look didn't come from the homeless teens and young men who received such gifts this year from La Casa Norte on the city's West Side.

"Some of these kids have only what they're coming in with," said Deanne Van Natta, a paralegal at DLA Piper. "It's the greatest gift. Underwear is fabulous."

Van Natta serves on the holiday charity drive committee at DLA Piper, which raised more than \$8,000 for the Solid Ground program at La Casa Norte this year.

The nonprofit helps homeless youths and families with basic needs such as food and clothing, as well as support services such as housing advocacy and job training.

The Solid Ground program provides housing for 16 homeless teens and young men between ages 16 and 21 for up to two years at 3507 W. North Ave.

La Casa Norte development and fundraising manager Jessica Rodriguez said the residents attend school or college and are required to participate in life skills and job classes such as resume writing and mock interviews. Each resident has his own room with a key.

"They have communal space," Rodriguez said. "They have chores and responsibilities to take care of."

Some Solid Ground participants grew up with parents or

guardians who have alcohol or drug dependencies. Others aged out of the foster care system and had nowhere to go.

"It might be that they identify with the LGBTQ community and their family was not supportive and so they end up getting kicked out," Rodriguez said.

In other cases, the young man's entire family may be homeless. But "as the older adult male, they're not eligible to stay with the family in a shelter," Rodriguez said.

Homeless shelters typically have an age cutoff of 15 or 16 for families with children, Rodriguez said, and that's become a problem as more families have lost their homes due to the recession.

The money collected from the DLA Piper holiday drive was used to purchase items such as socks, underwear, T-shirts and toiletries, which were on a list provided by La Casa Norte. Van Natta said the committee also bought each of the Solid Ground residents individual presents which included a new coat and McDonald's gift cards.

Holiday drive funds were also used for extra clothing, toiletries and flip-and-fold chairs for Casa Corazon, La Casa Norte's drop-in center for all homeless youth.

Bedding and some other supplies were purchased for La Casa Norte's newest facility at 1736 W. 47th St., which has 30 beds for homeless youth and also serves as a drop-in center.

Additionally, DLA Piper provided food and beverages for a holiday party. Rodriguez said the teens expressed thanks for a party that gave them an opportu-



Anne Geraghty Helms

nity "to really experience the holiday ambience that others get to experience."

There's not a lot of awareness about homelessness for individuals ages 16 to 21, Rodriguez said, and this group is often misunderstood and stigmatized. She said most holiday donations tend to be toys or clothing for children.

DLA Piper's specific interest in helping their youth is "amazing," Rodriguez said.

"It lets them know there are people out there that care about them despite what situation they're in," Rodriguez said.

DLA Piper pro bono counsel Anne Geraghty Helms said she enjoys the annual holiday drive because it's entirely staff driven, from choosing the charity and collecting donations to wrapping gifts for delivery.

"It's a nice way for all different groups in the firm to work together on a common cause," she said.

The DLA Piper staff raises money for the holiday drive

through a bake sale in the office and Friday jeans days beginning in October.

The firm connected with La Casa Norte through a partnership with lawyers at Verizon to teach Street Law Youth in Transitions classes at the aforementioned Casa Corazon.

The curriculum teaches self-sufficiency skills such as finding housing; handling lease agreements; managing cash and credit; accessing social services; and rights and responsibilities in employment.

The classes empower the participants, Rodriguez said, because they learn that even though they're homeless, they have protected rights and people to turn to if they need help.

"These kids were just wonderful and so into the program," Helms said.

With so much attention focused on homelessness among families and children, Van Natta and Helms said they never thought about the issue of homelessness among teenagers and young men until they started working with La Casa Norte.

Van Natta is amazed by their strength and resilience.

"One kid came in (to Casa Corazon) to take a nap and grab something to eat," she said. "He had a black eye and some other injuries."

Another teen told Helms that all he cared about was making sure that he and his brothers survive.

"I don't know that I could have survived on my own at age 16 or 17," Van Natta said. "I'm a strong-willed person and I don't think I could've done it."