

By Meagan Church

Photo
Barbara Allison

Growing Kids student Amari Wesson, 5, models his new snowpants at the school.

At the end of 2008, Mike Garatoni and his wife, Beth, co-owners of the five area Growing Kids Learning Centers, realized that the families at their schools seemed stressed. They didn't know if it was because of the economic downturn, busyness of the holiday season or a combination of both. But they did know they could help.

"We thought, 'Why don't we give everyone a Christmas gift? Here's free child care to go shopping or out for dinner,'" Garatoni explained. So from 4 p.m. until 9 p.m. one December Saturday, the Garatonis treated their clients to free child care. "We said, 'Care is on us. Let's make everyone less stressed for the holidays and take some of the pressure off.' It's something we could do since that's what we do."

The free child care didn't end

with a one-time event. The response was so great that they began offering it more frequently and on a regular basis. It has now grown to one Saturday per month and even two during December. "We thought, 'What the heck? It's Christmas.'"

Garatoni said it is a win-win situation for everyone. The teachers have the opportunity to earn some extra money if they want to, the parents already know and trust the people they are leaving their kids with, the kids are familiar with the people and the location, and the Garatonis have a chance to give back.

As for what the parents have thought, Garatoni said, "The people who use it are happy because it gives them a chance to get away. Some haven't gotten out in years. Heaven forbid they go out with their spouse! Even those who don't use it like the fact it's there just in case."

This year they stepped up their generosity even more with Operation Snow Pants. As a childcare center, they are required to take the children outside when it is warmer than 25 degrees. With families struggling more and more, fewer kids came equipped with appropriate cold-weather gear.

"Every year we'd do a clothing or food drive around Thanksgiving and Christmas. This year a lot of families weren't in a position to give. Instead, they could use something given to them. The tables had turned on them," he said.

Operation Snow Pants became an effort to make sure every child had snow pants, a hat and gloves. Growing Kids worked alongside a local Kmart that provided them with a discount to make it possible to give to 125 kids.

What has made the Garatonis so generous? "We know that circumstances are such that some families are going through transitions and we thought it was the right thing to do to add value as much as we could. Parents have to watch how they spend their money. They have to be cautious and careful. We understand that child care is a portion of their budget," Garatoni explained. "They put faith and confidence in us and we want to give back. It was just the right thing to do. It wasn't that we changed our outlook and became charitable. It just made sense." **IG**

Growing Kids Grows Generous