

# SOUTHCOAST

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## 'Magic of Christmas'

**Santa brings happiness, toys to children at health center**

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NEW BEDFORD — Four-year-old Madyline became giddy with excitement as it became her turn to meet Santa Claus on Wednesday.

"Hi, Santa!" she said with a wave and a smile.

The happiness only grew when she hopped on Santa's lap at the Greater New Bedford Community Health Center.

"Look at the smile on her face!" said one of Santa's elves, a volunteer dressed in red with bells hanging from a green vest.

After her mother, Thaisha Gonzalez, snapped a picture with her phone, Madyline took a few steps before returning to Santa and offering a hug.

"It's actually a really nice opportunity because lots of places you have to pay to go see Santa and take a picture," Gonzalez said. "At least this way they get a chance to enjoy."

Madyline and her siblings, Daniel, 9, and Adelaide, 3 months, were just three of more than 500 children the community health center prepared



**A youngster grabs onto Santa after seeing him for the first time. Greater New Bedford Community Health Center employees handed out toys Wednesday to children as part of a toy collection by staff and local organizations.**

[ PETER PEREIRA/THE STANDARD-TIMES/SCMG ]

to meet Santa. Each family had the opportunity to take a picture with the big guy dressed in red. One of Santa's elves handed each child a toy.

"It's been a joint effort for all of us here," said Maricher Thiridgill, the purchasing agent for the health center. "It's a lot of time, a lot of effort, a lot of

love. It's close to our hearts."

The funds raised for the annual event, which dates back longer than activity committee member Lloyd Bennett can remember, came from local businesses as well as internal fundraising.

For several weeks, employees

participated in "Jeans Days," which allowed employees to wear jeans on Friday for a cost of \$2 to \$3 deducted from their paychecks. The initiative raised more than \$6,000.

"It's been really good. It's been a good day," Bennett said. "We worked hard to get this accomplished. A lot of shopping. A lot of volunteers. A lot of people in the community have volunteered their time."

On the few occasions where tears followed young ones when they approached Santa, they soon dried up when they were handed a toy.

Countless children walked up to Santa and repeated Madyline's reaction.

One young girl was so focused on her new toy that she walked into a wall when leaving. Throughout the process a smile never left her face.

"There's a lot of things we've lost for kids to believe in. We've sort of taken away a lot of the innocence for kids today," Thiridgill said. "It's a different world than what we grew up in. So we've been able to capture those little small moments and re-instill the hope and magic of Christmas."

Follow Michael Bommer on Twitter @MikeBommerSCT.