



Anita Dean (second from left), poses with her granddaughter, Danielle Maness, Art Green, as Santa Claus, Shirley Gaither and Bobby Mosley.

Gospel Station serves as a holiday angel for local folks

BY LAYLA FARMER
THE CHRONICLE

While many in the local community anxiously awaited Christmas last week, the approaching holiday only served to tighten the knot in Elease Smith's stomach. Smith, a single mother of five, was laid off from her job last year.

"I was getting unemployment at first and the unemployment stopped," explained Smith, who worked for 12 years as a supervisor in Wake Forest University's food court. Since that time, she has been trying to piece together a living off the income she makes from various temporary jobs.

This holiday season, Smith couldn't afford to put anything under the tree for her children, who range from eight to college age.

"I was struggling because I had two daughters in college and the tuition had to be paid," related the longtime Winston-Salem resident. "I've been thinking about this for the past two months like, 'Lord, how in world am I going to find something for my kids?'"

Last week, Smith got the answer she'd been praying for. Anita Dean, a popular 1340 The Light deejay, responded to a plea Smith had written to her and invited Smith to come and take advantage of the AM Gospel station's annual toy giveaway.

"That's a blessing right there," Smith said, gesturing to the grocery bags full of toys for her kids. "God sent an angel. She (Dean) is an angel."

Smith's family was one of nearly 30 families that benefitted from the toy giveaway, which Dean, the long-time host of "Anita Dean's Praise and Worship Program," on Sunday mornings, has organized for the past eight years. The station had previously hosted drives in conjunction with other organizations, but Dean, whose on-air career spans more than two decades, said she wanted to come face to face with the people she was helping, so she started her own drive. She solicits potential recipients of the drive to write letters and tell her their stories. Then, the giveaway bags are carefully packed to suit the children in a specific family.

"It's a personal thing to me," Dean said of the giveaway. "I know exactly where these toys are going. I get to interact with the families. I read their letters, I know their pain."

Hollie Atkins of Greensboro was laid off from her job at a Hardee's restaurant six months ago and has been living with her mother until she gets back on her feet.

"It's been a struggle with no money," said Atkins, a



Hollie Atkins (right) with her son, Jacob and fiancé, Brian Hinkins.

mother of three. "It takes everything we have just to pay the bills. It's been hard."

One of Atkins' mother's coworkers told her about drive and Atkins didn't hesitate to transcribe her letter.

"It's been a real blessing," said Atkins, who attended the giveaway with her two year-old son, Jacob, and fiancé, Brian Hinkins. "It's a relief - a big relief."

Dean's daughter, Tonya, has helped her mother with the last four drives. The day of the giveaway is always poignant, she said.

"It's just rewarding to see the people come in and hear their testimonies and see how grateful they are," she related. "That makes me feel good because they feel good about what she's doing."

High Point resident Renee London, a former cook in a daycare, has been out of work since 2007. She spent much of the last year caring for her four children and her sister, who was terminally ill. London did not know about the giveaway, but says she had prayed that she would find a way to provide something for her children this year. A friend wrote to Dean on her behalf.

"I did not know what she was doing, but I thank God for her," London said of the friend.

London says she had approached several organizations that do toy drives, but was told she was too late to take advantage of their programs. When she got the call from Dean last week, it came as a total surprise.

"I'm stunned," she said with a laugh after the giveaway. "I'm bout to cry."

Like London, many of the people Dean encounters through the drive have faced extreme hardships over the last year. Dean says knowing what they have been through makes her even happier to give.

"It's just heartwarming to hear their stories," she said. "It's just something that I love to do. It's something that I'm going to do until the day I die."

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