

The event was planned by veterans who live at Homes for the Brave. The veterans donated what little they have to organize the party.



Autumn Pinette/Connecticut Post

Alan Dean, a Vietnam veteran, hands Easter baskets to Ishmael Castillo, 3, and Kerjanay Maitland, 4, at the South End Community Center in Bridgeport on Thursday. Below, William Willoughby, also a Vietnam veteran, helps Jenecia Oliver-Kelly, 3, left, and Tiajhanya Page, 4, dye their Easter eggs.

VETERANS MAP OUT EASTER FUN FOR KIDS

Homes for the Brave residents ignore own problems to host party

By KEILA TORRES
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BRIDGEPORT — The three dozen preschoolers squealed with delight, as if exclaiming victory, each time they found an egg or toy hidden Thursday on the grounds of the South End Community Center.

The holiday fun came early for neighborhood youngsters courtesy of the Easter bunny, and a few helpers, just a hop or two away from the community center.

The youngsters, ranging from 3 to 5 years old, also decorated eggs and enjoyed cupcakes and cookies baked especially for the Easter party.

The event was planned by military service veterans who live at Homes for the Brave, a Park Avenue agency that helps homeless vets get back on their feet.

The veterans donated from the little they have — many residents of Homes for the Brave are jobless — to put together the Easter party for the children.

“This all started when I saw one of the kids across the street without a coat,” said Alan Dean, 58, a Vietnam veteran.

Dean and other veterans quickly gathered hats and gloves to donate to children who needed the winter gear.

Michelle Genest, child-care site coordinator at the community center, said she was touched when the veterans asked her if they could donate the winter clothing just before Christmas.

Genest and the center teachers then had the children make a big “thank you” card for the veterans, and went across the street to sing songs in appreciation for the veterans.

She said that was how the partnership between the veterans and the community center began. And for the past three months, Dean and several other veterans visit the center, which is run by the Bridgeport YMCA, to read to the children every Friday. “The kids absolutely adore them,” Genest said.

As Easter approached, Dean, a former Marine, said he and Richard Upchurch, 48, a fellow Vietnam veteran, wanted to do something special for the children, just as they had done at Christmastime.

Erwin Williams, 53, a former Navy officer, volunteered to help and together the men asked other veterans at Homes for the Brave to donate anything they could to help fill Easter baskets for the children.

“In one month they raised over \$80,” said Joy Kiss, the Homes for the Brave executive director. This was a major achievement, she said, considering that many of the men do not work or have just recently acquired their jobs.

Upchurch, who began working for a roofing company a week ago, said he enjoyed organizing the Easter event, but added, “This was really a team effort.”

That was obvious as the Homes for the Brave staff joined the vets in hiding 350 eggs. Even newer residents of the veterans’ home caught the bug and pitched in.

William Willoughby, an Army veteran of the Vietnam War, has lived at Homes for the Brave a month and Thursday’s party was his first event with the community center youngsters.

“Seeing them happy made me happy,” he said.

Next Friday, he added, he plans to return to read his first story to the children.

