

Midwest Sports Academy Toy Drive Will Spread Christmas Cheer to Needy Children

Local non-profit seeking gifts for underprivileged families in Chicago, suburbs

For interviews or more information, contact Midwest Sports Academy CEO/Founder Jim Cook at (847) 809-8978 or jcook@midwestsportsacademy.org.

When the Ronald McDonald Hospital in Chicago reported a desperate need for toys for children in 107 families this Christmas, Jim Cook decided Midwest Sports Academy would serve as Santa Claus for these underprivileged kids.

But, organizing a toy drive for the hospital was only part of Cook's plan. The Midwest Sports Academy CEO and Founder expanded the toy drive to include needy families of students attending Washington Elementary School in Elgin and Willard Elementary School in South Elgin. The charity effort will provide toys and other gifts for boys and girls ages 1 to 14.

Cook can't wait to see the joyous looks on children's faces when they receive a new game, doll, coat or stuffed animal this holiday season.

"There are so many kids in Chicago and the Elgin area who come from families that are struggling to provide for them in this economy," Cook said. "With the help of generous businesses, families and individuals in the surrounding communities, we hope to collect several thousand toys in the next few weeks. Let's make this a Christmas that thousands of children will never forget."

Donations can be dropped off at one of three drop sites:

- The Einstein Academy, 747 Davis Road, Elgin, IL 60123
- Culver's, 280 Randall Road, South Elgin, IL 60177
- Village of Gilberts City Hall, 87 Galligan Road, Gilberts, IL 60136
- South Elgin High School, 760 E. Main Street, South Elgin, IL 60177

The deadline to donate toys or gifts for the Ronald McDonald Hospital is Wednesday, December 3. The deadline for the elementary school toy drive is Thursday, December 11. Gifts do not have to be gift-wrapped to be donated. A variety of gifts are needed, from baby and toddler toys to Barbie dolls, stuffed animals, books, art supplies, games, stocking stuffers, DVDs, headphones and gift cards. With help from South Elgin High School's girls and boys basketball teams, the gifts will be delivered to the hospital and the elementary schools in time for children to receive them at Christmas.

History of reaching out to others

Midwest Sports Academy is no stranger to spreading Christmas cheer to those in need. On November 17, 2013, one of the most violent tornado outbreaks in state history rocked central Illinois. No town was hit harder than Washington, Illinois. Tornadoes leveled nearly one-fourth of this close-knit community's homes and businesses, leaving thousands of people's lives devastated.

As he watched TV reports showing the tornadoes' massive destruction, Cook decided he had to help. For the last 25 years, Cook has dedicated his career to providing resources,

mentoring and peer mediation to kids and teens, most recently by founding the Midwest Sports Academy in suburban Huntley. Serving kids ages 9 to 16 in the suburbs and the Rockford area, the non-profit organization provides a supportive environment that teaches youth how to build a strong foundation for their future.

"I felt moved to do whatever I could to reach out to them," Cook said. "I'm passionate about making a difference in people's lives, primarily the lives of children. I wanted to extend a helping hand to them, especially at Christmastime."

Cook's Midwest Sports Academy mobilized nearly a dozen organizations to support a relief effort for Washington residents. Individuals, families and businesses dropped off donations at South Elgin High School, The Einstein Academy of Elgin and Pro Fusion in Geneva. The humanitarian drive generated hundreds of blankets, toiletries, medicine and other critical supplies for needy families. The outpouring of generosity required a large moving truck to haul the necessities downstate. Students from the Midwest Sports Academy joined Cook and his staff in loading the truck with the donated items.

"Students, families, local business owners – so many folks gave generously to the drive. It was an honor to be part of it," Cook said.

Cook and Tory Gum arrived in Washington November 27 to present the donations. The volume of supplies that donors gave to victims touched the townspeople so deeply that the Warehouse in Washington asked Cook if the Midwest Sports Academy could lead a Christmas toy drive for children in Washington victimized by the tornadoes.

"There was no way I could tell them no. How could anyone say no to such a significant need?" Cook said.

The Einstein Academy, South Elgin High School and Pro Fusion agreed to serve again as drop-off centers. The same organizations that supported the relief effort enthusiastically signed on to join the toy drive, including the South Elgin Police Department, Wells Fargo Advisory, PepsiCo, T's N More and the McHenry Community College women's basketball program.

The tornado relief toy drive resulted in hundreds of donations. Cook and a volunteer drove another moving truck to Washington in December 2013 to deliver the toys.

"This experience blessed everyone who contributed to the toy drive and relief effort as much as it blessed the families in Washington," Cook said. "Donating much-needed gifts helped make the holiday season a little more joyful for victims of the tornadoes."

About Midwest Sports Academy

Improving the future for children is the motivation for why Cook established the Midwest Sports Academy in 2012. The academy offers sports and character-building programs that teach youth the core values of a strong work ethic, personal discipline, honesty, respect and inspiration for making positive life decisions.

"I started this program to see children accomplish their dreams," Cook said. "This program provides an opportunity to make a difference for all the children who don't have the financial means or just the chance at a hopeful future. They learn to develop good citizenship and life skills that will benefit them now and as adults."

The academy features a host of programs, from outdoor activities, mentoring and sports programs to mission trips. Program offerings are designed to meet kids' specific needs. The academy serves students from a wide range of communities, including Rockford, Elgin, Aurora, Bartlett, Streamwood, Schaumburg, South Elgin and Crystal Lake.

For more information on the Midwest Sports Academy, visit www.midwestsportsacademy.org, call (847) 809-8978, email info@midwestsportsacademy.org or visit www.facebook.com/MidwestSportsAcademy.