

# New Orleans' own Santa Claus

**Ozanam Inn administrator prepares to refill his sack with toys for homeless kids**

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**Sheila Stroup**

Clarence Adams explains how he ended up working at Ozanam Inn.

"God tricked me," he says, with a smile.

The assistant administrator at the homeless shelter on Camp Street had decided he wanted to move on from his job in the hotel business and went to interview for a management position at the Inn, not knowing anything about the salary or the faces he would see there.

The salary, he discovered, was not a lot, and the faces broke his heart.

When he went into the dining room at lunchtime, he saw children there.

"In all the ideas I had about homeless people, I never once thought of children," he says. "When I came here for the interview, it slapped me in the face."

His first thought was to turn down the job if it was offered to him so he wouldn't have to see those scared little faces every day.

"But then I thought, 'If I don't take it, that's not going to change anything,'" he says. "I decided, if they were good enough to offer me a job, I'd stick it out for a year."

That was in 1994. Fifteen years later, he can't imagine working anywhere else.

"I'm very happy being here," he says. "Sometimes, just seeing our success stories makes it all worthwhile."

The homeless children still break his heart, though: the ones who spend their nights in shelters, in transitional housing, in abandoned houses, in cars. He calls them "the forgotten angels."

"I'm just a fool for the kids," he says.

One day in 1998, when he was talking with friends who provided services for homeless people, he told them how much it bothered him that homeless children didn't get to have a happy Christmas like the ones he remembered from his New Orleans childhood.

"I said, 'The only thing they have is eating Christmas dinner with hundreds of people they don't know,'" Adams says. "I told them, 'If I ever get rich, I'm going to throw them a party.'"

Felice Hill, who worked with the Daughters of Charity, had a better idea. She told him, "Let's do it now."

And Hill, Adams and Anita Guy, who worked at the St. Thomas Clinic, began to plan their first Forgotten Angels Christmas Party for children in the New Orleans area. They started asking for donations of food and soft drinks, new toys, books and clothes. But they didn't realize how time-consuming planning the party and gathering the donations would be.

"About a week before the party I said, 'I'm never doing this again,'" Adams says. "But when I saw the kids' faces that day, I said, 'We have to do this every year.'"

And every year until 2005, they did. They served a hot meal with desserts and had music, entertainment, pictures with Santa and lots of presents.

"For one day, they just got to be kids," Adams says. "For one day, it was about what they wanted, not what they needed."

After Hurricane Katrina, the volunteers didn't have the resources to hold the annual party, but last year Adams gathered lots of new toys and clothes and goodies, and he and Santa took them to area shelters.

"I didn't want those children wondering why Santa didn't bring them anything," he says.

This year, Adams and his helpers decided that in spite of the economy they were going to have a real party for the forgotten angels.

"It's a little bit scary because it's been so long since we've done it, and we don't have much time," Adams says. "But we've already invited around 200 children, so we can't tell them, 'Oops. We don't have what we need.'"

The party will be Dec. 19 at the Franklin Avenue Baptist Church, and Adams needs new toys and games, new clothes, food and monetary donations to make it a success.

"These kids have nothing," he says. "Nobody should have to live like that, but especially not a child."

When I tell Adams he seems like New Orleans' own Santa to me, he disagrees.

"I don't see it," he says, shaking his head. "It's the people who reach into their pockets and say, 'Let me help these children.' They're the ones who give them Christmas."

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Sheila Stroup's column appears every Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday in the Living section. She can be reached at [sstroup@timespicayune.com](mailto:sstroup@timespicayune.com) or 985.898.4831. Comment or read her online at [NOLA.com/living](http://NOLA.com/living).

INFOBOX:

HOW TO HELP THE 'FORGOTTEN ANGELS'

Checks can be made out to "Ozanam Inn for Forgotten Angels" and sent to Ozanam Inn, P.O. Box 30565, New Orleans, La. 70190-0565. Any money donated will be used for the party. Gifts of new toys and new clothes for babies through young teenagers can be brought to the Inn at 843 Camp St. from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. through Dec. 16. Help for the hot meal is also welcome. Call Clarence Adams at 504.523.1184 or 504.723.8149 for more information.