

Salvation Army kettle funds surpass goals

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Southwest Florida residents dug deep in their pockets this season to help local Salvation Army offices set fundraising records to serve those suffering from the withered economy.

The Salvation Army of Lee, Hendry, & Glades was short of its \$550,000 goal until Estero residents Darlene and Kevin Jursinski penned a check for \$3,500 late last week.

Its kettle campaign hit \$550,560, which qualified it for the top fundraising spot in the state among the 48 Salvation Army locations, organization officials said.

"It's absolutely fabulous," said Meg Geltner, the Fort Myers-based general manager. "It's been a while since we met the goal."

The dollars will flow toward the Army's Christmas outreach for the 5,000 families who received gifts and meals and will cover toys for next year, she said.

The Salvation Army in Collier County also hurdled over its \$300,000 goal to bring in \$318,000 in kettle donations, which pushed it to the fourth-highest fundraising spot in the state, group leaders said.

What's more, it rang up \$1 million in total donations, the most in its Christmas fundraising history in Collier, said Chris Nind, a spokesman. The location opened in 1982.

"It is a very wealthy county, but it also has a huge amount of poverty," Nind said. "But I think our residents have seen that, and that's what made them donate."

Leaders at both locations expressed gratitude to their donors.

Along with record numbers of needy people served by groups like The Salvation Army, Southwest Florida has seen some of the steepest spikes in food stamp use in the state and has been identified as an epicenter of the real estate bust.

Geltner credited nine gold coins dropped in kettles and the resulting publicity as edging the Fort Myers-based organization toward its goal.

Last week, the general manager and Kevin Jursinski, a real estate and business lawyer, were talking about being close to the goal when Jursinski offered to topple the benchmark.

"I really respect The Salvation Army and what they do," said Jursinski, 60.

He had been a Salvation Army board member in the '90s and is working on developing a scholarship program for children served by the Army.

"More people realize we need it more," he said. "In this area, that's a safety net, and it speaks volumes about the quality of people in our area."

Statewide, The Salvation Army's kettle donations were about the same as last year, said Dulcinea Cuellar, a statewide spokeswoman.

Kettles throughout the state collected about \$7.5 million in 2009 and \$7.4 million in 2010, she said.

Mary Stringfield, a 48-year-old Fort Myers resident, received a turkey, groceries and some presents for her eight grandchildren through the Salvation Army.

Stringfield spent five months in the Army's homeless shelter and now works in crisis management for the organization.

"It means everything because we live on a budget and to overstep our budget it puts us right in the hole," she said.