

Richmond remembers own Santa By Tom Lochner

In an era of increasing disillusionment, many children no longer believe in Santa Claus, whom they see as "a Christmas-time huckster of coffee-makers and used cars." But not in North Richmond, where children have their "real-life Santa, Charles Reid."



Bob Larson/Contra Costa Times

Ingrid Guadalupe appears to be too sleepy for Santa Claus, former Dallas Cowboy football player Benny Barnes, during the 59th annual Charlie Reid Christmas Party at the Shields-Reid Community Center in Richmond.

Oakland Tribune writer Gerald Davis wrote those words around Christmas 1979, nine months after the death of the longtime Richmond recreation director and mentor to two generations of North Richmond youths. But the words were as up-to-date as ever at Sunday's annual Charlie Reid Christmas Party at Shields-Reid Community Center, where volunteers with the foundation that bears Reid's name, including many from his own family, kept Santa alive, singing Christmas carols, handing out gifts and playing Santa.

Now in its 59th year, the party is one of North Richmond's most enduring traditions.

"My Daddy started this when I was a little, teeny girl," said Reid's daughter, Florence Reid-Randle, who presided over Sunday's event with her sister, Ivy Reid-Lewis, and Reid-Lewis' son Todd Lewis, Charles Reid's grandson. "Now I'm 71 and it's still going."

Todd Lewis, who went to camp with the San Francisco 49ers, headed a volunteer gallery of former National Football League players, including Benny Barnes of the Dallas Cowboys, Gary Weaver of the Oakland Raiders, Larry Bates of the Seattle Seahawks and Greg Kragen of the Carolina Panthers. Many of the former players have roots in the North Richmond area.

The NFL Players Association and other NFL-affiliated groups co-sponsored the event along with several businesses including the family-owned Omega Pacific Electrical Supply Co. of Richmond, where Lewis is vice president. The Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office and the San Francisco and Contra Costa County fire departments provided toys and other assistance, Lewis said.

Pastor Nicholas Betts of Davis Chapel Christian Methodist Episcopal Church thanked God for the gift of Jesus Christ, the memory of Charles Reid and the kindness of Reid's family.

Danny Vargas, one of Reid's earliest disciples who now lives in Antioch, translated the proceedings into Spanish. The children sang "Deck the Halls," "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" and "Jingle Bells" and took turns sitting on Santa's lap. Then came a drawing, with the winners receiving bicycles and other large toys. Every child got several gifts: a book, sweets, dolls, cars and other toys. Last year, 1,000 children got gifts, Reid-Randle said. On Sunday, there seemed to be even more children, said several repeat visitors who were lined up awaiting their turn.

Angelica Rendon of Richmond, who came with her four children, said that with unemployment and underemployment on the rise among friends and acquaintances, Sunday's event helped fatten an otherwise lean Christmas. Maria Velazquez of Richmond came with her husband and two children in tow. With her husband unemployed, there is little money for gifts this year, so Sunday's party was a godsend, Velazquez said.

Born into a California pioneer family in 1898, Charles Reid moved to Berkeley when he was 6, according to the Oakland Tribune article. Reid became a star pitcher for the all-black semi-pro Pierce Giants. With his semi-pro playing days over, he moved to Richmond in 1935.

Reid was watching a baseball game in Nicholl Park when someone asked him to umpire, and he did so regularly from then on. In 1947, Reid became recreation director; later that year, he put on his first community Christmas party.

Another Oakland Tribune article, this one in 1975, dubbed Reid "the man who helped build black sports in Richmond." In fact, Reid helped kids regardless of their ethnicity.

"Mr. Reid taught me how to play baseball, basketball, football, the punching bag, jumping rope," said Vargas, 58, who later played quarterback for the Dodge Boys, a North Richmond-based Latino sandlot football team. "He taught me to be a good sportsman, to go to school and not drink -- drugs weren't as prevalent then, but he mentioned them."

Reid never cursed and laid down the rules fairly but firmly, Vargas said,

"If you didn't have the right attitude, if you were a troublemaker, if you were a bully, if you treated the little kids bad, you were suspended from the playground for a day or two until you changed your attitude," Vargas said.

He remembered Reid fondly, down to his cocker spaniel, Sparky, who entertained the kids by leaping through the water sprinklers in the park. The man who taught him sports and sportsmanship is his role model to this day. "I was no angel; my halo was tarnished," Vargas said. "Mr. Reid taught me to walk on spiritual ground."

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