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COMMUNITY

Kids enjoy holiday gifts thanks to one man's vision 78 years ago

Relatives of Richmond's Charles R. Reid have kept his Christmas giving tradition alive for decades.



By David Mills

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Lakiea Okereke and her family at the 78th Charles R. Reid Foundation Annual Children's Christmas Party. Credit: Tyger Ligon for Richmondside

It all started in 1947 when **Charles Reid** handed out some Christmas stockings stuffed with food and toys in his Richmond neighborhood. Reid lived across the street from the city park that would eventually bear his name.

It was a way, he said, to support underprivileged children and ignite the spirit of giving.

In the ensuing decades, Reid's holiday vision expanded into a community gathering that, at times, has provided holiday cheer to as many as 2,000 people.

Today, a smaller version of the tradition lives on with some fourth-generation help from Reid's great-grandchildren.

"This event means so much to me and my family," said Sydney Lewis, a great-granddaughter of Reid. "There's so much need in the community. That hasn't changed in the past 78 years."

Lewis' brother, Marcus Lewis, feels the same way.

"It's all about giving," he said. "It's a good feeling to keep this tradition going."



Marcus Lewis, the son of former 49er Todd Lewis and great-grandson of Charles Reid, continues the Christmas Party tradition in Richmond. Credit: Tyger Ligon for Richmondside

The latest iteration of the [**Charles R. Reid Foundation Annual Children's Christmas Party**](#) unfolded on a recent Sunday afternoon, about a week before Christmas.

Over the course of three hours, about 500 people filed through the gymnasium at the [Richmond Police Activity League](#) (RPAL) headquarters. Inside, parents and kids ages 2 to 12 walked by tables filled with clothing, such as scarves and knit caps, as well as an array of children's books. At each stop, families were allowed to select two items as holiday gifts.

At the end of the line, two former professional football players dressed as Santa Claus greeted the children. Volunteers selected gifts for each child from bins that were sorted by age and gender.

There were plenty of smiling children and grateful parents.

Gifts are either donated or bought by the Reid Foundation

Marcos and Teresa Reyes brought their four children. It was the Richmond family's first visit to the Reid Christmas party. They said it was a fun experience that their children enjoyed.

Kenadrea Dorsey came with her cousin. Four children were among the group. All of them happily grasped presents outside the gymnasium.

Back in line, Lynda Dendina of Richmond was looking at one of the clothing tables while her daughters, ages 7 and 4, visited Santa. The younger daughter interrupted her search when she rushed up, clutching a shiny new Barbie doll.

All the clothing and gifts are either donated or purchased with Reid Foundation funds that come from individuals as well as [corporations](#) such as Chevron and Mechanic's Bank.

One of the clothing donors was Dorian Reid, a niece of Charles Reid. She sat at the table that displayed some of the 240 scarves she knitted this past year.

"I enjoy crocheting and it feels good to give them out," she said.

Her uncle would have been proud of the scene on this Sunday afternoon.



Dorian Reid, a niece of Charles Reid, with some of the 240 scarves she knitted this past year. Credit: Tyger Ligon for Richmondside

Charles Reid had roots in Berkeley and Richmond

Charles R. Reid was the second of 13 children, born in 1898 in Angels Camp, Ca. He grew up in Berkeley and lived most of his adult life in Richmond.

Reid ran track and played baseball at Berkeley High School. He also pitched for the Pierce Giants, a Negro League baseball team in the area.

Reid believed that sports could help keep young people out of trouble. As the recreation director at what was then known as Shields Park in North Richmond, he encouraged sporting activities. The park was eventually renamed Shields Reid Park in his honor.



Charles R. Reid (center, in tie) is shown at his first charitable Christmas party at the Shields-Reid Community Center in North Richmond. Courtesy of Charles R. Reid Foundation

Reid helped oversee the Christmas party until his death in 1979. Other family members kept the event going in his memory.

Eventually, Todd Lewis, one of Reid's grandsons, formed the Charles R. Reid Foundation as a nonprofit organization. The charitable group took over the party and, for a while, also organized winter and summer camps for children.

In 2008, RPAL began hosting the party when Executive Director Larry Lewis, who is not related to the Reid family, became involved.

Todd Lewis died suddenly nine years ago of a heart attack at the age of 56. His children stepped up to fill the void. Both Sydney and Marcus now serve on the nine-member Reid Foundation board of directors.

'The party can make a big difference in a child's life'



Emily (left) and Alfred pose with Santa Claus after receiving gifts at the 78th annual Charles Reid Foundation Christmas party. Credit: Tyger Ligon for Richmondside

Jim Collini was a close friend of Todd Lewis and began volunteering at the Christmas party in 2001. He's now the president of the Reid Foundation board.

Collini said the party can make a big difference in a child's life. He recently talked with a bank employee in Richmond who noticed his Charles R. Reid Foundation shirt. She told Collini that she went to the Christmas gathering as a child and once received a new bicycle as a gift.

Collini also brought his children to volunteer at the event when they were young.

"I wanted to teach my kids how to give back," he explained.

One of those children is Olivia Collini, who serves on the Reid board and is deeply involved in organizing the Christmas party. She is still touched at what she sees, even after being a part of the annual event for more than two decades.

“It’s the moments when a child lights up that makes it so special,” she said. “It’s heartening to see how this makes a difference.”

It’s not often that a community event can continue for 78 years. Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia, who represents Richmond, attributes the success to the quality of the Reid Foundation leadership and the group’s continued focus on its mission.

“They have continued the foundation’s legacy. They have maintained the family’s passion,” Gioia said. “It’s a small organization, but it does really good work.”

The Reid family hopes to continue this charitable work for many more generations.

“There are a lot of kids who don’t have a Christmas,” said Sydney Lewis. “Times have changed, but the need has not.”

“This means something to [the] community,” she added. “We’re going to keep it going as long as we can.”

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