

Charity, Service a Family Tradition for Div. 18's Louvenia Harris

By ERIC RAPP

(Feb 22, 2002) For the Harris family of Watts, charity and community service have been a way of life for more than 35 years, and Metro Bus Operator Louvenia Harris of South Bay Division 18 has been right in the middle of it all.

The family's tradition of service started in the early 1960s, when Harris' mother, Alice, was 16, homeless, and trying to care for two infant children. With nowhere to go and nothing to eat, she could only beg for work in exchange for food and shelter.

A Caring Family > Metro Bus Operator Louvenia Harris is surrounded by her family with (clockwise from lower right) charities founder "Sweet" Alice Harris and her husband, Allen; sister Alvenia Hatten, brother-in-law Egerton Forster and Louvenia' sister, Linda Forster, and sister Aubrey Watson.



Photo by ERIC RAPP

She suffered rejection after rejection until, finally, one kind woman went against the wishes of her family and gave Alice work as a housekeeper and shelter in her garage. As repayment, the woman asked only that Alice promise to help someone else in the future.

Alice agreed, promising that she, her children, and her children's children would help others in need.

A Chance To Help

The 1965 Watts riots left many people desperate for assistance. Alice, who had since married and had two more children, found her chance to keep her word to the woman who had helped her. Nearly 40 years later, that promise is still being kept.

Today, "Sweet" Alice Harris, her husband Allen, and their daughters Louvenia, Alvenia, Twonda, Linda, and Aubrey operate Parents of Watts which sponsors separate shelters for homeless men, women and couples, a foster family agency, a child daycare and school, a youth center with a computer lab, a 24-hour crisis center, a teen pregnancy home, a male parolee halfway house, and a construction business.

Each member of the family also somehow found time to earn at least one college degree. Louvenia Harris earned two.

As if that weren't enough, each daughter and her family contribute \$400 a month for community activities that include a Martin Luther King Day celebration, 4th of July fireworks, a Thanksgiving Dinner Pass Out, and a Christmas party for 15 inner-city schools.

A family tradition of giving

Harris, a four-year MTA veteran, especially enjoys the Christmas party.

She says it grew from a family tradition in which each daughter would receive Christmas gifts, but would pick one gift to give to another child who was not as fortunate.

Now, that tradition has grown into a giant party for third and fourth graders from 15 schools in Watts. The children are bused to a location where the streets have been blocked off, and as Harris says, "On these premises we don't know the word 'no.' Can you jump in the jumping house? Yes. Can you get your face painted? Yes. Can you ride the ponies? Yes."

Not only do the children get to play to their hearts' content, some of the neediest receive gifts, all purchased from the contributions of the Harris daughters.

Last Christmas, Santa Claus (played by former Los Angeles Mayoral Candidate Steve Soboroff) gave away bicycles and bicycle helmets, skateboards and pads, and games to children who were identified by their school teachers as needing a gift the most.

Harris says the bicycles were bought on sale from Target, but no store would sell 30 bikes to one person. So all five daughters and their families had to race to Target stores throughout the Los Angeles area to purchase enough bicycles for the Christmas party.

All the trouble was worth it, says Harris, "to see the joy on those kids' faces."

Helping those in need

At Thanksgiving, the Harrises distribute gift certificates redeemable at local grocery stores. "You can eat well for \$30 if you budget properly," she says. They used to serve entire cooked meals, but that soon became overwhelming, even for this energetic family.

Harris and her family sometimes secretly adopt families in need, giving them groceries and small necessities without letting the family know where the help is coming from.

It's done anonymously, says Harris, "because if you know that it's me, you would treat me differently. But if you don't know who it is, then you have to be nice to everybody, because somebody was nice to you."

For the future, Louvenia Harris has no intention of breaking "Sweet" Alice's long-ago promise. Her children Jonnessa, Johnallen, and Johnathan all help with charity events, and soon her granddaughter Kamerrin will get into the act too.

"Our family has been so blessed," says Harris. "We're able to help other people, and that is what it's all about."

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Harris family organization, Parents of Watts, is located at 10828 Lou Dillon Ave., Los Angeles, 90059. Eric Rapp is a Transit Operations correspondent intern assigned to write news articles about employee activities at the operating divisions.

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