I.H. Pursuit of Excellence Essay

Since opening the doors of their first location in Hammond in 2006, and a second in Ponchatoula in 2011, Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home has served hundreds of families, and given back to the community in many ways. The rural cities of Hammond and Ponchatoula, nestled between the much larger cities of Baton Rouge and New Orleans, are full of culture and Cajun flare. Dubbed as an outdoorsman's paradise, the area is known for its outstanding boating and fishing, hunting, fairs and festivals, and strawberry farming. Primarily a lower middle class community, the residents of Hammond and Ponchatoula are no strangers to hard work and financial struggles.

As a member of The Tangipahoa Voluntary Council on Aging Board of Directors, Martha Mckneely Thompson is reminded often of the hardships that many of the area's elderly citizens face everyday. Due to her passion for volunteerism and a knack for bargain shopping, Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home's Santa's Senior Workshop was created. Martha's 83year old grandmother, Jeanette Brown, was her inspiration for the workshop. Ms. Brown's family has tried to convince her that her presence is the greatest present of all, yet she insists on giving Christmas gifts to her grandchildren and great-grandchildren every year. Like many other elderly people, her generous heart is much bigger than her budget and she spends the entire holiday worrying about her finances rather than enjoying the season. The idea of the Santa's Senior Workshop is to alleviate the financial and emotional stress that the elderly face during the holidays.

At the end of November, the staff of Brandon G. Thompson Funeral Home visited the Ponchatoula Senior Center and explained the concept. The seniors were asked to make a list of the people they wanted to give a gift to. They were shown pretend money that they would use to "buy" a variety of items, which were donated by the funeral home, and a few examples of what we would be available. The funeral home staff contacted the Ponchatoula High School Key Club sponsor, who was excited to have the members help with such a heart warming project. Early in the morning of December 8, 2011, the funeral home staff, Brandon and Martha Thompson's children, and local high school students transformed the Ponchatoula Community Center into a winter wonderland, complete with Christmas music, decorations, an extensive gift wrap station, and most importantly a gift shop! Each volunteer wore a Santa or Elf hat to add to the excitement. Approximately 40 senior citizens participated in the event and were each given twenty dollars in pretend money to shop with. Items were priced at one, three, five, or ten dollars and the participants shopped for people of all ages, from infant great grandchildren, to fellow elderly friends and spouses.

After choosing the perfect items for their loved ones, the seniors proceeded to the gift wrap station. They had the choice of wrapping their own items or to have the high school students do it for them. Overwhelmingly, most chose to have the students tackle the job, but they did enjoy choosing the gift wrap, bags, bows, and tags. They seemed to appreciate the assistance with gift wrapping as much as they did the gifts! Each participant's gifts were placed in large red Santa sacks to take home with them.

The spirit of Christmas was abundant as the funeral home staff helped serve lunch to the senior citizens, who were happily chatting about their gifts and Christmas plans. Several of the participants explained that the thing they loved about this event is that it did not make them feel as though they were being treated as children, which is often the case, with other projects, crafts and games. The funeral home staff loaded the sacks full of gifts into the Tangipahoa Voluntary Council on Aging transportation vehicles and said goodbye to our new friends. Seeing the joy on the senior citizens faces was a great reminder of what the spirit of Christmas is really about, helping others. It is true that it is better to give than to receive, but helping others give is even better!