

BWS will be Twenty-Five

“Breakfast with Santa” (BWS) will celebrate its 25th Anniversary this December. Only three years after the Sun City Rotary Club was formed, in 2001, Rotarians launched a service project to provide Christmas gifts for needy children and families in our community. The Club partnered with the Georgetown Fire Department to conduct a pancake and sausage breakfast and distribute gifts to ten children from four families selected from the Georgetown Independent School District’s ESE (Extended School Enrichment) program. The basic concept and mission of the BWS project partnership with GFD and GISD has remained essentially the same, although many operational details have been adjusted over the past twenty-four years. Sun City Rotary Club members manage fundraising, acquire gifts for the children/families selected by GISD and then serve breakfast that includes complimentary Santa photos for our community. GFD provides the breakfast venue and firemen cook the pancakes and sausage. Believe it or not, over the past twenty-four years we’ve had more than one instance of several fireman having to leave in the middle of cooking breakfast to respond to a fire! Probably the biggest fire in Georgetown that happened during breakfast was on Saturday, December 17, 2016, when the Eats on Eighth restaurant just off the square downtown burned down.

The first BWS pancake breakfast was conducted at the fire station on Main Street in downtown Georgetown. That location presented some real challenges because the available space was limited plus the kitchen was upstairs and Rotarians got a lot of exercise going up and down those stairs with platters of food. A couple of years later, when GFD Station 1 opened on FM1460, BWS moved and was able to accommodate much larger crowds and, although there weren’t any stairs, the kitchen still wasn’t really designed to cook pancakes and sausage for hundreds of guests. Also, that location still required considerable work for the firemen to prepare the garage area to serve a meal as well as bringing in tables and chairs. BWS crowds continued to increase every year so, beginning in 2014, BWS has been held at the Georgetown Community Center in San Gabriel Park which is a perfect, large location with a commercial size kitchen, plenty of on-site tables and chairs and convenient parking.

Although the most visible part of BWS is the actual breakfast, the primary objective of the project is helping kids and families in our community and area during the Christmas season. The “helping” component of BWS, which is the primary mission, continues to be completely independent from breakfast. By 2011, ten years after beginning, generous donations from Rotarians, individuals and local businesses had grown to the point that BWS was able to provide gifts and grocery cards for one hundred twenty kids from forty-three families as well as gift cards for teenagers served by The Georgetown Project’s NEST program plus a cash donation to Jarrell’s Christmas out-reach program. “Helping” provided by BWS is now significantly greater than the proceeds from breakfast, but breakfast continues to be a popular Christmas activity our Rotary Club is proud to provide every year for the community.

Young adults that attended breakfast as a child are now bringing their own children to the event!

Although the breakfast component of BWS, other than the venue and method of delivering of Santa to the event (one year he was delivered to the door on the back of a motorcycle), hasn't really changed, out-reach has definitely evolved. For many years the selected families would submit a "wish-list" of gifts for their children: favorite colors, toys, clothing sizes, etc. Rotarians would then use this information to purchase items and eventually wrap the gifts. This entire process involved several days of shopping, storing the items before wrapping, wrapping the items, storing the items again and finally delivering the items to the families. The highlight of this stretch of activity was having to explain one year to the Georgetown Police Department that the truck we were using wasn't stolen and that we were indeed paying for all the items in the colorful trash bags being loaded into the truck. This phase of BWS grew to the point that over eight hundred total packages were being wrapped each year and then bundled in colored trash bags for each individual child. Delivery originally was done on a different Saturday than breakfast with Santa going directly to the homes, on a firetruck, with Rotarians helping to distribute the bags to each child. As BWS continued to grow, the delivery phase expanded to two Santas and two firetrucks as well as two large support trailers to carry the bags. Gift delivery time, resource requirements and safety concerns forced BWS to later change the process to recipients coming to GFD Station 1 on the same Saturday that breakfast was taking place across town at the Community Center to pick up the gifts for their family.

December 2020 presented new challenges. We knew that COVID-19 would not allow us to conduct our traditional breakfast or allow selected families to shop for gifts for their kids (in 2015 the shopping process was changed from Rotarians shopping and wrapping to simply inviting selected families to do their own shopping which significantly simplified the previous gift acquisition, storage, wrapping and delivery issues). For several years we had been giving families a grocery gift card in addition to gifts for their children. Receiving the grocery card sometimes seemed to almost be a bigger deal for some families, often resulting in more tears than getting several bags of gifts for their kids. We knew that many families would still need Christmas "help," especially with all the hardships created by COVID-19, so we were still able to provide a significant number of families grocery cards that year. Although we couldn't serve breakfast or take traditional Santa photos, we did have a "drive-by" event outside the Community Center with Santa greeting the kids as they received bags of goodies. Although the world was beginning to return to normal by December 2021, we repeated the special "drive-by" process again, just to be safe.

Our traditional BWS breakfast at the Community Center resumed in 2022 and we served over 800 guests. Attendance gradually increased to 950 breakfast guests in 2024 so we're confident the 25th BWS breakfast on Saturday, December 20 will get us back to pre-pandemic

levels (1100 plus). BWS has continued the “food-related” focus developed during the two COVID-19 years and we are striving to provide grocery gift card “help” to more and more GISD families each year. Cash donations to organizations like The Caring Place (Food Pantry) in Georgetown that provides food-related assistance to our community throughout the year, the Locker Foundation and Backpack Buddies that provide assistance to GISD students, and Opportunities for Williamson & Burnet Counties that delivers “Meals-on-Wheels” to seniors. The Sun City Rotary Club is extremely grateful for the local business community sponsors and other individuals who provide the very generous contributions that have enabled BWS to grow and thrive for the past twenty-four years.

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