



Submitted photo

Becky Reed, left, assists Roger Johnson with the program he started, A Child's Smile, that aids rural families living in poverty.

A Child's Smile brings rural families in need a brighter Christmas

Program focuses on helping those who fall through the cracks

By Karen Stokes
Special to the Enterprise

ASHIPPUN — The program A Child's Smile provides donations to rural families in need whose children won't experience the joy of receiving gifts for Christmas. Its founder, Roger Johnson, believes that people should get involved and help those who need it.

"There comes a time in life when you realize you've got to do something," said Johnson.

That time came for Johnson after watching television coverage of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. It made him think about all the families that need help and he felt something should be done. He then started A Child's Smile.

The program is in its sixth year. In 2016, the program raised over \$8,253 and served 195 children. This year it is projected to increase.

"One hundred percent of the money that comes in goes out," Johnson said.

The program primarily helps families in poverty in Dodge and Jefferson counties.

"Rural kids fall through the cracks," said Johnson. "Small rural families don't have much going for them. I hope they are part of programs that Oconomowoc and Hartford schools have available."

The latest U.S. Census states that 9.9 percent of the population in Dodge and Jefferson counties (164,557 people) live below the poverty line, a number that is lower than the national average of 14.7 percent. The largest demographic living in poverty is female 25-34, followed by female 18-24 and then male 6-11.

Johnson, 72, a farmer near Ashippun, works with St. Olaf's Church in Oconomowoc, the Ashippun Lions Club, public schools, individuals and community organizations partnering together for a common cause.

Becky Reed, one of two female members of the Ashippun Lions Club, assists the program by scouting families who need help.

"I've been helping Roger for the last two years," said Reed. "It's a comfort for our community to know that there are resources out there to help them."

Johnson chooses to work with people he trusts to keep the integrity of the program intact.

"Confidentiality is important. I don't know who the families are. I talk to the school principals to identify families and I put the gift card in an envelope and they distribute them to the parents.

The contributions total approximately \$40 per child.

"I want to show people they can think outside the box and start programs in their own communities," said Johnson.