

Shopping spree courtesy of cops

Elizabeth PBA helps out with a visit to mall

By Karen Keller
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Eighteen Elizabeth police officers in uniform were on a different kind of detail yesterday: Shopping.

But the officers in blue weren't buying at the Jersey Gardens Mall. Instead, they were helping young people with disabilities shop for gifts for friends and family in a fourth-annual event that this year raised \$1,900.

Each shopper received a \$50 gift card from the officers. The kids and young adults are affiliated with Mountainside-based pediatric rehabilitation center Children's Specialized Hospital treats conditions including trauma, such as a brain injury, and medical conditions present at birth, such as cerebral palsy.

For the officers, it was an opportunity to do good during

the holiday season. And for the 38 teens and young adults receiving the support, it was a chance to be independent from parents, give back to caregivers and to socialize, program officials and youth recipients said.

Detective Joe McDonough, 39, who organized the event, said the cause has gotten so popular that he doesn't even need to advertise it with Elizabeth Police Department's Police Benevolent Association Local No. 4.

"It's all word of mouth," McDonough said. He said police officers enjoy the event because they get to help the youths — many of whom travel in wheelchairs — feel more independent.

"You're able to help them go out without a family member," he said. "You get to be part of their family for a while."

Officer Mike Nicolas said he

came to the mall soon after his nighttime shift.

"We're running on an hour-and-a-half of sleep," said Nicolas, 25. But he said he felt so content he would have volunteered for the program last year had he known about it.

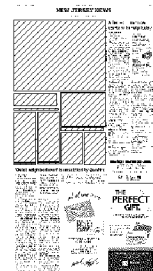
Wence Morales, 14, of Harrison said she spent time online Saturday night researching the locations of the stores. She bought a "New Moon" T-shirt depicting a character of the popular teen vampire movie for her sister and an Old Navy hoodie for her brother, she said.

Other gifts included a yoga mat for a mother and a knit hat emblazoned with the name "Lady Phenom," for a sister who's a rapper.

Lt. Dan Saulnier said he helped a young man choose a Dallas Cowboys hat for the shopper's dad. Though the officers and kids were busy crossing things off of lists, there was one item they added.

"We hope for more kids next year," Saulnier said.

Karen Keller may be reached at (732) 293-4925 or kkeller@starledger.com.





PHOTOS BY MATT RAINFY/THE STAR-LEDGER

Shopper Elise Schoeneman of Westfield is assisted yesterday morning at the Jersey Gardens Mall in Elizabeth by city Patrolmen Mike Nicholas, left, and David Haverty, right. Elise was among 38 youth and young adults with disabilities who went on a shopping spree at the mall with holiday gift cards provided by Elizabeth police. Police and volunteers helped the shoppers, affiliated with Children's Specialized Hospital of Mountainside, choose gifts for family and friends.



Elizabeth police Detective Dan O'Farrell asks his new friend, 15-year-old Tim Mooney of Clark, where he wants to shop.