

Volunteer of the Year – Southeast Wisconsin

Jake Martin

United Way of Jefferson and North Walworth Counties

Governor's
Service Awards



When the organizations that previously led holiday toy drives in the Whitewater area notified the United Way of Jefferson and North Walworth Counties that they could no longer continue, Jake Martin was instrumental in saving Christmas for many Whitewater area residents. Not only would the toy drive require reorganization and collaboration with community partners to serve families as had been done previously, but it also would need to address changing needs and new outreach strategies with the addition of over 600 families from Nicaragua to the area over the past year.

Recognizing that many recipients of the toy drive did not speak English as a first language, Jake began learning Spanish in order to not only help register families to participate, but so that he had the ability to converse with many of their families in their primary language and make them feel more welcomed. The results of this effort were tangible, as Jake was able to help register over half of these new families for their Holiday Helpers program. This meant that the program would now be able to provide each child with several gifts, including a game for every family, stocking stuffers, a book for every child, and three toys; one of which being something special they had on their wish list.

Jake collaborated with other organizations to assist in the collection of toys and eventual distribution of gifts to families. He spent hours scouring the internet for items that would fulfill children's wish list items, including some being quite unique and challenging to locate. He also dedicated his time to translate the individual letters to Santa from each family or child, as well as letters they would receive from Santa.

As the event approached, Jake assumed an even larger role when the lead coordinator for Holiday Helpers developed COVID-19 the week of the event. In response, Jake stepped up and worked around the clock, picking up hundreds of toys from community partners, sorting toys by age group, tagging and bagging items from individual wish lists, and setting up thousands of toys for pickup.

Jake's commitment to serving his community continues to expand as he embarks on a new pathway, as he began serving as an AmeriCorps member this January through Marshfield Clinic Health System – Community Corps. His placement at the United Way of Jefferson & North Walworth Counties allows him to further contribute to making a difference in the lives of others.

In describing the impact of his service, Elizabeth Ellis from United Way of Jefferson & North Walworth Counties explained that “without Jake, over 600 children in our area may have gone without on Christmas morning. He is a Santa Superstar!”

