

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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### Community Comes Out to Share Big Mama's Holiday Spirit

FORT LAUDERDALE –The luxurious Hilton Fort Lauderdale Beach Resort was the setting for the 11<sup>th</sup>-annual “Coming Together for Our Youth” Holiday Fundraiser and Toy Drive on Friday, Nov. 30.

This year’s gathering, called Project Village, to support Essie “Big Mama” Reed and our local underprivileged children, attracted more than 300 dignitaries, business and community leaders and philanthropists.

“It was a holiday setting full of pride, humanity and thoughtfulness for children; our Team Members at the Hilton Fort Lauderdale Beach Resort are honored to host this event and set up the stage for the tremendous efforts that Dr. Elizabeth King and Mr. John Weaver put forth in assisting our community and children in need.” said Andreas Ioannou, general manager of the Hilton.

“We couldn’t have done it without the generosity of all of our sponsors, partners and volunteers,” said Dr. Elizabeth King. Dr. King, who is CEO and founder of the International Holistic Center in Fort Lauderdale, co-hosted Project Village with her husband, John Weaver, president of the Central Beach Alliance.

“Big Mama does everything in her power to bring us together for our youth, and we’ve shown her that she’s got a huge crowd of people who admire what she’s been doing for decades. All of us want to help,” Weaver said.

Thirty years ago, when Big Mama started distributing food and spiritual guidance to the kids in her neighborhood, she did it all alone. She and her three sons lived in the family’s fish market and slept on bare concrete floors, but even then, she helped others by sharing what little she had. “I know firsthand what it’s like to have nothing while trying to raise your kids,” Big Mama said.

Her wonderful work came to the attention of Mr. Weaver and Dr. King and more than a decade ago, they held the first holiday party to benefit Big Mama’s Team of Life. They started the ball rolling by asking relatives and friends to stop by their home and bring a toy for Big Mama.

There was not a dry eye in the house when Big Mama’s oldest son, Samuel Reed with tears in his eyes delivered his heartfelt message to all that attended, “Thank you for coming tonight and supporting the work that my mother does. She works day and night to make a difference”.

From that homespun beginning the event grew by leaps of faith and bounds of generosity until it became what it is today: a major celebration of all that is good and giving in the people of South Florida.

When Mr. Ioannou attended last year’s 10th-annual holiday fundraiser at the Las Olas Beach Club, he went up to Mr. Weaver and Dr. King and said: Next year, why don’t you bring all your Christmas decorations to the Hilton and we’ll host the big event? They happily agreed.

The centerpiece at the Hilton was the couple's Christmas village and 100 Santas. The Christmas village is a holiday fantasy conceived by the couple to illustrate this concept: It takes a village to raise and nurture a child.

Sponsors of this year's bash, in addition to the Hilton Fort Lauderdale Beach Resort, were the International Holistic Center, the Women's International Holistic Council, and Portside Realty.

A great time was had by all. The Hilton provided food, beer and wine, as well as the extraordinary venue and free valet parking. SkinnyGirl donated the vodka for Mr. Weaver's and Dr. King's signature drink, the John-elle-tini (for John and Elizabeth). What made this event more special were the many businesses and organizations that donated their talent and time. Leo Casino and his band had everyone grooving and dancing and Nerissa Sparkman and Michael Wright from Nerissa Sparkman Photography Studio captured the memories. VOXXI, a new progressive online publication, was this year's event media partner. There was even a very special appearance made by Santa and Mrs. Claus.

Volunteers who provided the necessary help to make the event happen included a group of Broward County public school teachers. Also providing much needed support were members of two organizations, the Women's International Holistic Council (WIHC) and the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO). NAWBO will continue collecting toys for the cause at their next monthly meeting. Both organizations will provide volunteers to help with the distribution of toys in Broward County.

General Motors, a corporate partner of NAWBO provided a fleet of vehicles to transport the 1,000 toys collected to Las Olas Beach Club and even donated a Cadillac for a week for the silent auction. Many other businesses and individuals donated silent auction items to help raise funds for this worthy cause.

The Women's International Holistic Council, Dr. King's new non-profit organization dedicated to empowering women and children, is already planning next year's Project Village.

*And it's not over yet, you can still take part. Until Dec. 13, please drop off contributions of toys and money (make checks out to Team of Life Inc.) at the International Holistic Center, 3471 N. Federal Highway, Suite 410, Fort Lauderdale. Please call (954) 903-9426 for hours of operation.*

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