

MOTORCYCLE GIFT RIDE

## Valley's Hells Angels chapter gives presents to children whose parents are incarcerated

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Neither rain nor, well, more rain stopped bikers from Simi Valley's Live Ride Church from delivering Christmas presents Sunday.

"I'm sure that people are nervous," Reverend Rick Fish noted as drops began to fall outside his Santa Susana Knolls chapel around noontime. "We're Californians, c'mon, most people don't take their Harleys out in the rain! But what an opportunity this is."

An hour and a dozen drenched miles later, it was indeed all smiles among the eight, wet leather clad bikers, their car-driven family members and Santa's helpers and, of course, those who care for the intended gift recipients - children with one or both parents currently serving time in prison.

"We didn't think they were going to come this year with all the rain; they're so awesome!" exclaimed Elsey Fernandez after the hogs and a pickup truck full of tarp-covered toys pulled up to drop off presents for her grandkids.

"It makes me feel so wonderful to know that there are still people who care," Fernandez said. "They're so awesome; they make the kids' year, every year, because they're getting something from their dad."

Dad couldn't be there, of course. But like at the other 13 Ventura County stops on the Live Ride gift giveout, performed in conjunction with the nationwide nonprofit organization Angel Tree, presents picked out with the child's age and gender in mind came with a note dictated by the incarcerated parent.

Every year for a good half-decade, Live Ride - which ministers to so-called outlaw bikers and others with a hard-living past - has brought gifts to the children and, usually, a prayer for the current caregivers, more often than not grandparents, aunts or uncles.

The Hells Angels San Fernando Valley Chapter donated most of this year's toys; Live Ride and Angel Tree act as intermediaries for the sake of those who don't want active motorcycle outlaws giving in their name - or rolling up on their lawn a week before Christmas.

Church members contributed cash for additional presents, some of which are given to cousins or foster- or step-siblings who may share the designated giftees' homes. That way, no child feels left out.

"Angel Tree ministers to the prisoners inside, who

sign up to have their kids be delivered a gift,” explained Bonnie Lara, who with her reformed bank robber husband Arthur coordinates Live Ride’s Angel Tree effort. “As long as the caregiver’s OK with it, and feel the kids are going to be OK with us coming, we go out and deliver the gift.”

About 200 toys were collected for the 2010 distribution. Beside individual children, such organizations as the San Fernando Valley Rescue Mission and a battered women’s shelter also will get toys.

“A lot of times, these kids don’t have anything,” Bonnie Lara noted. “And unfortunately, some in society think that the kid has to pay for the parents’ crime. It’s not the kids’ fault that their parent is in prison, and they’re hurting already. So you can go and just do something small and it means the world to them.”

It also means quite a bit to the sopping wet delivery guys. “Whether it’s raining or not, the kids still need toys and they’re still expecting to see the motorcycles,” said Randy Martin, a nine-year member of the Live Ride church who used to run with a Chicago bike gang and kicked a serious drug habit. “I’ve been doing this for the last five years and it’s great to see the kids’ faces as all the bikes come rolling up. And actually, it’s not just those kids that come to see us; the neighbors’ kids hear all the noise and they come out.

“And they’re astounded that we’re all Christians, and we’re out there doing the work of Christ instead of what a lot of people associate motorcycle clubs with,” Martin added.

A couple of neighbors braved the downpour to watch the Live Riders deliver presents to Simi residents Jade and Vincent Lamos.

“It’s really cool,” Vincent, 13, said. “Except it’s wet. But it’s nice they came out.” “It’s really awesome,” echoed older brother Jade, 16. “I love the bikes; they let me sit on `em. And it means a lot, because I don’t get to see my dad that much.”

Nearby, the boys’ mother, Annette Barnes, failed to prevent her own tears from mixing with the raindrops running down her cheeks. “They do a great job,” Barnes said of Live Ride.

“It’s really exciting when they all come out, and that makes the boys feel really special.

“And just to let them know that their dad has reached out to make sure that they know he’s thinking of them...” Barnes said of the man who’s been in a federal penitentiary for eight years. “He can’t be here to do something, but these people can.”