

'We're here for a reason': Maria Wassef gives big from big heart

Andrew Atkins Naples Daily News

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To see Maria Wassef in her element is to know what true joy is.

The Peru native and longtime Naples resident, on a normal year, would flit from table to table at a Naples Chik-Fil-A, where she'd distribute presents. She'd check in with families, with children, asking how they're doing, what the volunteers need, how she can help.

And smiling. Always, always smiling.

More: [For impoverished Collier County children, 'Breakfast With Santa' makes Christmas possible](#)

And: [Naples Auto Donation Center in East Naples steers through pandemic woes](#)

"I really do believe that the seed of kindness could be planted in childrens' hearts," Wassef, 66, said. "They realize that it's very easy to be kind. You don't have to give a lot."



Naples resident Maria Wassef sits for a portrait on Thursday, December 17, 2020. Wassef runs a non-profit, Maria's Birthday Wishes for the Homeless that helps those in need including the homeless. It is her mission to spread kindness for those who don't frequently receive it. *Andrew West/The News-Press, The News-Press*

But giving a little is not in Wassef's nature. Giving as much as she can is the modus operandi of her nonprofit, [Maria's Birthday Wishes for the Homeless](#). Before it was a nonprofit, though, it was a mission out of Wassef's heart.

Wassef recalled speaking to a homeless woman who said somebody hadn't told her "Happy Birthday" in five years.

"I always think we're here for a reason," Wassef said. "We know that you're here and we celebrate you. And that was the whole idea of how this started."



Maria Wassef, the founder and president of Maria's Birthday Wishes for the Homeless, talks with a friend during her annual, "Breakfast with Santa," at Chick-fil-A Saturday, Dec. 8, 2018 in Naples. *Jon Austria/Naples Daily News*

Since as early as 2009, Wassef has delivered cupcakes to shelters throughout the area on a weekly basis to celebrate the birthdays of those there. Every year, for Christmas, she organizes a "Breakfast with Santa," which sees car after car loaded with presents to be distributed to children and families in need.

This year, of course, meant her full-scale breakfast could not be conducted as years past. Instead, she turned her garage into a moderate replication of Santa's workshop, wherein volunteers from the organizations she normally distributes through picked up the presents to be delivered to those they served.

Carmen Cisneros, who is the executive director of a maternity home for homeless women, [Sunlight Home](#), said Wassef brings joy and cheer — and cupcakes — with each visit.

"She makes sure every person she encountered, she greets with a smile and makes them feel loved and noticed," Cisneros said. "She will ask about them. She'll remember their names. She just makes them feel important."

To understand why that's significant, Cisneros said, one needs to understand the kind of shelter Sunlight Home is.

"We have women here who come completely broken and homeless. Our women have never encountered kindness, especially from other people," she said. That means Wassef's kindness "shows them a different life than what they've had."

Those who know Wassef, like friend Ann Roczko, are familiar with her generosity.

"Maria is so generous and caring. She always thinks of others before herself," Roczko said. "She tries to do as much as she can to help the people who need helping."

Wassef's son, Mike Wassef, witnesses his mom's kindness as he volunteers with her.

"She wants to see people succeed and be happy," he said. "It's her purpose ... She does glow when the events are going on. She's animated and you can just see that it gives her life."



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Beyond the work she does in Southwest Florida, her efforts have touched the opposite coast in Los Angeles, where, outside of the pandemic, she's previously delivered supplies to the homeless. When she's not volunteering, she's a hairdresser, though the pandemic has also limited how much she does that.

And, of the lessons Wassef has said she's learned, the most important one is of the heart.

"When you're truly from your heart and you speak, people listen," she said. "Angels will come and help you carry on and you'll never be alone."

Andrew Atkins is a Naples Daily News features reporter. Contact him via email at andrew.atkins@naplesnews.com. To support work like Andrew's, please consider subscribing: <https://cm.naplesnews.com/specialoffer/>.