

**OPINION**

# ‘You found me!’: The Shelter guest that brought joy to a mom and little boy | Opinion

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Most of us will never know what it’s like to spend the holidays in an emergency shelter, but this is the reality for the 26 adults, 29 children and seven pets currently in our care. I would like to share a story that will help paint a picture of what the holidays are like here at The Shelter.

Throughout the year, our Shelter staff does an amazing job of assisting survivors, but during the holidays, with the help of hundreds of community volunteers, they go into overdrive, collecting, selecting and wrapping gifts. They decorate every nook of the emergency shelter and plan parties to help make the holidays brighter for our participants.

One of those participants was 35-year-old Jenna, who reluctantly came to The Shelter the week of Christmas 2018. She did not want to tear her son Jaden away from his home, especially during the holidays, but life with her abusive husband had escalated to a point that she was fearful of their safety.



Linda Oberhaus (Photo: Submitted)

Needless to say, four-year-old Jaden was not looking forward to spending Christmas at The Shelter.

On Christmas Eve, all of the children (we had about 30 children staying with us) were given new pajamas. They put them on and gathered to set out milk and cookies for Santa Claus. Then, as is the tradition of nearly every family, the children were urged to go bed and go to sleep so Santa could come. All residents were asked to remain in their rooms until 7 a.m.

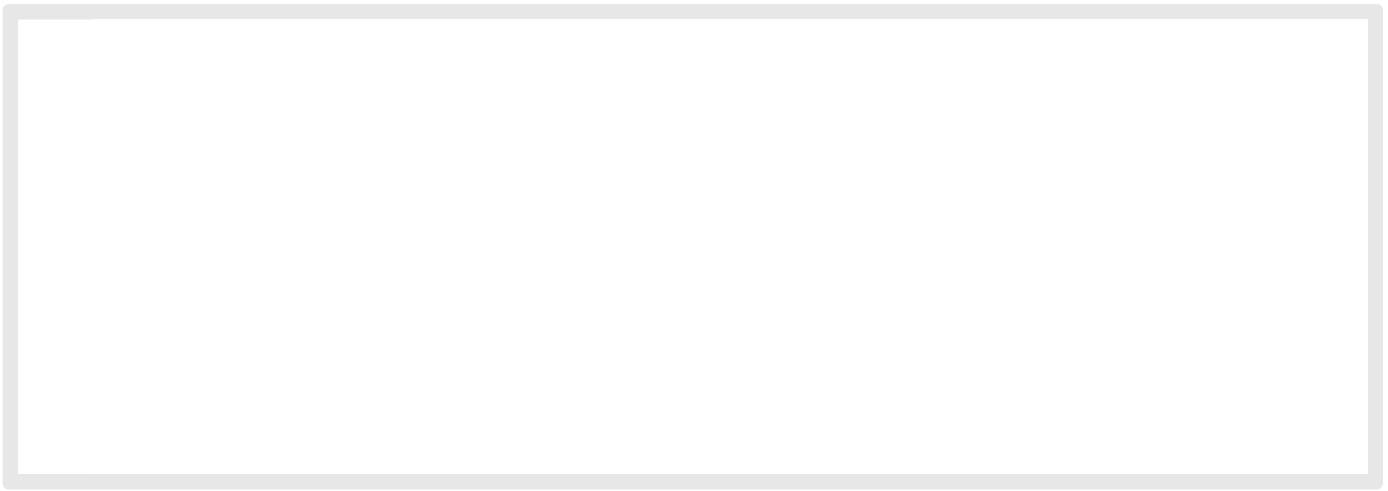
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On Christmas morning, there was a jingle of a bell at 7 a.m., signaling that it was time for the families to come out. To their surprise, nestled beneath the tree in the family room were wrapped presents for everyone. Next to the fireplace, sitting in a chair was Santa and Mrs. Claus, their faces filled with smiles and their arms filled with gifts.

Jaden was beside himself with joy. Hopping from one foot to the other, he ran right up to Santa, gave him a big hug and tearfully exclaimed, “Santa, you found me!”

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As you can imagine, there wasn't a dry eye in The Shelter, and this story will be told again and again. So many hearts were touched that day, but most importantly was the fact that Jenna, and all of the courageous mothers staying with us, could feel a moment of joy, knowing that so many people cared about them and were pulling for them to find a better life.

As we prepare to open a second emergency shelter in Immokalee, we are especially grateful for the support that will ensure the safety of hundreds more survivors in that community. With your help, Santa found Jaden. With your help, peace and hope find thousands of survivors of violence and abuse in our community.

May your holiday season be filled with the joy of a child found by Santa Claus and the love of a mother's grateful heart.

*- Linda Oberhaus, CEO, The Shelter for Abused Women & Children*

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