

## Halfway house residents give back at Christmas

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They lowered the castle's drawbridge on Wednesday morning, and something good happened.

Toys poured out. And games.

They came out in bunches and will be delivered to underprivileged children for Christmas. This was over on Lee Avenue in that castle-looking building. You know where that is? The one with the turrets just off Airport Road in southeast Bismarck.

It's the home of the Bismarck Transition Center, a halfway house for convicted felons. It appears some of them, at least, have truly embraced the idea of making the transition from incarceration back into the community. Several residents at the center have used their own money to buy toys for kids whose stockings might otherwise have been a little light this year.

"It's good to give something back to the community," said resident Cliff Eaton, who donated a drawing set.

Eaton and fellow residents Tony Eley and Wesley Miller - all of whom are serving sentences on drug charges - helped to load several bags full of toys into Shari Doe's SUV on Wednesday. Doe and Barbara Messmer, from Burleigh County Social Services, will distribute the presents to children who need a little sunshine.

"This is such a great program," Doe said. "There are a lot of people out there benefiting from the generosity of this community."

Jessica Messmer, a work-release coordinator for the transition center, is running the gift drive. The 3-year-old event is a popular one among staff and residents, she said.

"Some of (the residents) who have been here before started asking me about it in November," Messmer said. "I've had a lot of guys tell me they know what it's like to be locked up at Christmas and not be able to buy their kids gifts. They wanted to help."

The residents, who have jobs either at the center or out in the community, use their own money to buy gifts. Many of them still have fines and restitution to pay, but they work with their case managers to see if they have room in their budgets to give a little bit. One resident had a good amount of wiggle room this month, and donated \$100, Messmer said.

Eley, who said he grew up in a house with 17 siblings, knows what it's like to be skipped over at Christmas.

"I just wanted to donate, so hopefully a kid will get something I never got," he said.

Miller agreed with Eaton that it's nice to be able to give something back to the community.

"It's for the kids," Miller said. "Kids need presents at Christmas."

It's a good lesson that worthwhile community service doesn't have to be ordered by a judge.