

Burlington County Times

NJ TRANSIT's River LINE transforms into "Polar Express" ride

Every family battling childhood illness who are staying at the Ronald McDonald House were invited to the special holiday program.

BURLINGTON — Dozens of families from the Ronald McDonald House of Southern New Jersey boarded NJ TRANSIT's River LINE cars Saturday and were transported into a magical "Polar Express" ride at the Waterfront Entertainment Complex River LINE light rail station in Camden.

Every family battling childhood illness who are staying at the Ronald McDonald House were invited to the special holiday program. More than 25 families participated in the event this year, which was made possible by local sponsors such as the Transit Police, Republic Bank and Geico.

"(The Ronald McDonald House) reached out to NJ TRANSIT last year and we were more than excited to take part in this, and we're hoping that we can keep doing this for as many years as they want to," said Michael McLaughlin, assistant superintendent of NJ TRANSIT and honorary elf for the day.

This is the second straight year that NJ TRANSIT has hosted the event and officials are eager to make the recreation into a holiday tradition. A second train was added this year in order to accommodate more families battling childhood illnesses.

"I think it's important for local businesses, local agencies, to take part in these kind of events just to help the community, help to improve the community, and, for this event specifically, just to bring a smile to these kids faces. That's really what I'm hoping for, if we achieve anything today, it's that," McLaughlin said.

The children were escorted via firetruck and greeted by Mummers playing "We Need a Little Christmas" while officials from NJ TRANSIT, Ronald McDonald House and Transit Police cheered on either side of the railings.

"All of the children staying at the Ronald McDonald House have serious illnesses," said Development Director Tina Fiorentino, "Because it's the holiday season, we wanted to give them the magical adventure of going to the North Pole." Donated by the community, each child was decked out in their comfiest set of PJs when they received their golden ticket from the conductor before boarding the express. Each child received a happy meal, a "magic" whistle, a Polar Express book to read along with, and various other items all donated by the community, Fiorentino said.

"For the children, all they do is go to doctors, and their day is occupied by all the things that they have to endure, from surgeries to treatments, and to have this experience for them, to brighten up their day, is what the holiday season is all about," she said, adding her team is working to make the event annual.

Christa Crescitelli, of New York, said that being able to be a part of the event is "such a blessing." She has been staying at the Ronald McDonald House for the last six months with her daughter Mariana and her two sons David and Chris, who both suffer from serious illnesses.

"Just being able to do something as a family (is exciting)," Crescitelli said. "To be able to have these special moments. "It's tough with all of the challenges, there are really no words to describe it. The holidays, and even regular things, are really just not applicable because my boys are in and out of the hospital, so these opportunities are immeasurable." Charlotte Reyburn, 19, and Emma Reyburn, 9, also joined the adventure.

They spent the last two weeks at the Ronald McDonald House after traveling here for Emma's treatments in Ireland. The pair were grateful to have been given the opportunity before they travel back home Monday. "Emma is really excited to be here and be able to recreate one of her favorite books with all of the other kids in the house," Rayburn said.

Once inside, families were transported into a winter wonderland thanks to volunteer elves who helped decorate the light rail vehicle and later led the groups in caroling. The two hour festive ride beginning in Camden traveled down to Burlington South station where children were greeted by Santa, who had gifts ready for every child.

"Creating a magical day for the kids from the Ronald McDonald House is such a special event for us during the holidays," said NJ TRANSIT Executive Director Kevin Corbett. "We are proud to be a part of an event which allows children to be kids and briefly put aside the health challenges they endure. I thank all of the NJ TRANSIT employees and others who volunteer to make this heartwarming experience such a success."