

## FEATURE

## 'LUCES' brings light for the holidays



Gamaniel Beltran (right) says a prayer with his "toy helpers," including his daughter Marie Beltran (center) in the parking lot of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church, Rochester, before the group sets out to deliver toys to nearly 300 children Dec. 16.



Beltran hugs Iris Pendones, 11, (right) and her sister, Isis, 7, at their home in Rochester, as he delivers Christmas toys Dec. 16.



Frank Beltran sorts bags of toys in the basement of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church rectory, before delivery begins.



Beltran prays with (from left) Guadalupe Gonzalez and her daughters, Iris and Isis, along with the other volunteers delivering toys (not pictured). Gonzalez, originally from Cuba, helps pass out toys to refugee families who live in her building.

About 290 children from nearly 200 families in inner-city Rochester and the surrounding area will have a better Christmas this year, thanks to Gamaniel Beltran. Beltran, 71, with the help of two of his children, Frank, 31, and Marie, 23, organized the annual LUCES toy drive for less fortunate children.

Twelve years ago Beltran and his wife, Nancy, parishioners of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, started LUCES (*Luchemos Unidos Contra el Sida*, "Fighting Together Against AIDS"). His wife has since died.

LUCES began as a spiritual support for people with AIDS. People called Beltran's house, asking him to pray for their own struggle with AIDS, or for a family member who had AIDS. LUCES grew to minister to people with cancer or other terminal illnesses, and finally to refugees and others living in poverty. In addition to the spiritual ministering, Beltran, a former Marist brother, professor and pastoral assistant, provides people with clothing, food, and furniture, along with referrals to other agencies. He also visits maximum security prisons, and preaches to prisoners about hope, dignity and respect.

While Beltran and his family are Roman Catholic, LUCES helps and receives help—donations and volunteers—from people of any denomination.

The toys are collected at Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Children too old for toys given an envelope containing \$20 to 40. Last year there was such an overwhelming response, that the Beltrons did not have to collect toys this year. However, they plan to hold another collection next year.

The program continues to grow through word of mouth. "Thousands, literally thousands, of people know about my father," Frank said, "and while they may not know who he is, they know his last name is associated with one thing, and that is help."

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ANDREA DIXON.