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By ROBERT PIERCE

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All across the world, bells are ringing, children are singing, and all is merry and bright.

Yes, Christmas is in the air everywhere, including Liberal, and Parks and Rec is helping local youth celebrate the season with some fun activities and by helping them keep warm with some donations from local gift givers.

The department started its yuletide fun and giving in November with a "Warm the Children" clothing drive, with all donations going to middle school and high school students in the Liberal school district in need of warm clothing.

While the drive ended Wednesday, Parks and Rec's Ronna Stump said donations can still be made by dropping them off at the Rec office at 1109 W. Seventh in Liberal from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Thursday or from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday. Checks can be made out to Lighthouse.

Donations for younger kids will also be accepted.

"Coats, stocking caps, gloves, anything to help the kids stay warm is appreciated," Stump said.

The drive is sponsored by the Rec Department's Youth Mentoring Action Team and USD No. 480's Bright Futures. For more information, contact Monica Vega at 620-626-0133.

The Rec Department had also scheduled its annual Christmas hayrides to start on Monday and Tuesday, but due to the cold weather in the area, the rides will now start today, with other rides scheduled for Monday, Tuesday and Thursday.

The starting time for each hayride will be 6 p.m. the day of the ride, and the cost is \$2 per person or \$30 for a group of 20. The rides will start at the Rec Center, and participants must pre-register. For more information, call 626-0133.

"Come ride with us around town, and see the Christmas lights and all the decorations of Liberal," Stump said. "We will be stopping by Spencer Browne's for a hot drink."

Prior to Saturday's Downtown Christmas Parade, youngsters can enjoy Parks and Rec's annual Christmas Carnival from 1 to 3 p.m. at the Rec Center.

A variety of carnival games will be played, and lots of prizes will be given away, along with cookies drinks and bingo.

Entry fee for the carnival is \$3, and pictures with Santa will be available for the children for a fee of \$2.

Children can also get a letter from Santa Claus courtesy of Parks and Rec.

“If you would like your child to receive a letter from Santa, come by or call the Recreation Center at 626-0133,” Stump said. “We will get all the information we need so that we can have Santa write a special letter just for you.”

Letters from Santa will be sent out by Dec. 19. Staff is asking for a donation to help with the cost.

Children will have another opportunity to visit Kris Kringle just before Christmas on Dec. 21 when the Rec Center hosts Pancakes with Santa.

That event will take place from 9 to 11 a.m. and is free. Pancakes with Santa is sponsored by the International Pancake Day board and Liberal Parks and Rec.

Children can also have their picture taken with Santa for \$2.

Of course, with Christmas and New Year’s just around the corner, that means Christmas break will soon be in session for area schools. Stump said Parks and Rec will most likely have something for kids to do during their time off from school.

“We haven’t got it all narrowed down yet, but we will be having some activities for the kids during Christmas break,” she said. “We just haven’t sat down and really finalized what we’re going to do.”

Stump said the frightful weather outside does not stop the lack of ideas for fun for the young ones.

“This is very easy to do,” she said. “We have all kinds of games in here that we can play. We can have all kinds of tournaments, pool tournaments, ping pong tournaments, Xbox game type tournaments. Very easy to find things to do inside.”

Stump said kids seem to be more attracted to the Rec Center during cold spells than they are in the heat of summer.

“Sometimes, we say, it’s so nice today outside, they stay inside, and when it’s really cold outside, that’s when they want to go outside,” she said.

One event missing from this year’s Parks and Rec holiday calendar is the department’s annual community Christmas lighting contest. Stump said the event was discontinued in recent years seemingly due to lack of interest.

“We quit that a few years ago when I had to call people up to see if they wanted to enter,” she said.

Stump said Parks and Rec officials try to add to the annual Christmas fun, but as for now, they are simply trying to make the activities they have more fun.

“The ones we have, we try to improve them, do something different with them,” she said. “Our Christmas carnival, we’re going to have some different activities than what we’ve had in the past.”

Rec. dept. plans numerous Christmas activities

Friday, 13 December 2013 12:39

But with a wide variety of yuletide fun on the December calendar, there is still likely something for all kids to do during the holiday season at Parks and Rec.