

# Temple provides holiday hope for children

## Cooper City event helps more than 100 youngsters from Children's Home Society

**By Chris Guanche**  
STAFF WRITER

It's not every Thanksgiving dinner that includes Santa Claus and a synagogue.

Both were part of the Holiday for Hope event at Cooper City's Temple Beth Emet. Started in 1989 by Dreams for Kids, Holiday for Hope events have spread across the world to benefit local children's charities. The Cooper City event featured more than 100 youngsters from the Children's Home Society.

The event's goal was to bring families together in a relaxing environment, said organizer Debbie Milam, founder of The Best You Can Be Foundation, a Weston-based nonprofit. The foundation works with social

service agencies and schools to teach children conflict-resolution and stress-reduction techniques.

"We teach children and adults how to find peace in their lives and overcome adversity," Milam said.

Holiday for Hope provided the foundation with an opportunity to bring those techniques to new families. Working in partnership with Dreams for Kids and the temple, Milam has staged the event locally for three years. The first year's group included 60 children and grew to 90 in 2008. For 2009, it helped about 115 children.

"Each year we're building," she said. "Each year it gets a little bigger."

Families ate a full Thanksgiv-

ing meal and watched entertainment from sports mascot Billy the Marlin, as well as a magician's magic show. Face painters worked on parents and children alike, giving them painted masks that looked like animals or Spider-Man. Once the meal was over, families could take pictures with Santa Claus or work together on group art activities.

Each activity was designed to include empowerment exercises. At one table, families personalized small wooden boxes with inspirational quotes. At another table, girls and boys worked on memo boards where they could list daily what they're grateful for.

One table featured a hands-on nutrition demonstration. At

that table, 7-year-old Julian Yepse, of Miami Gardens, learned about sugar content in soft drinks. By pouring 10 teaspoons of sugar into a small bowl, Julian received a visual representation of how much sugar is in a single can of Coca-Cola.

Visual learning is essential in getting a message across to children, said Jill Michelson, CEO of the American Institute for the Prevention of Childhood Obesity. Working as "Ms. Cala Ries," Michelson gives nutritional presentations to children at schools across Broward County. Elementary school children are a prime target for picking up good health information and sharing it with their parents at home.

"Every child has a different way of learning," Michelson said. "Children between the ages of 6 and 11 are most impressionable, and bad habits can be hard to break."

Julian's stepfather, Carlos Deleon, said the event was a great activity for the family.

"We're having a great time," Deleon said. "[Julian's] usually not one to deal with crowds, but he's doing well."

Fort Lauderdale resident Leigh McCain came to the event with her four children. McCain said they enjoyed the face painting and art activities.

"It's a wonderful event," McCain said. "The kids had a great time."

For more information, visit [www.bestyoucanbe.org](http://www.bestyoucanbe.org).

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