

# Atlantans live the legacy: find needs, fill them



Over a century after Merrick founded the National Christ Child Society, 110 dedicated volunteers in Atlanta carry out her mission to “find a need and fill it.”

From rocking newborns in the NICU at Grady Hospital to mentoring children from low-income families, these women have made a tangible impact. In 21 years, as members of the Atlanta chapter of the National Christ Child Society, they have put in thousands of volunteer hours helping at-risk children of all ages in metro Atlanta.

Patti Anhut, a longtime member of the Atlanta chapter and its president

from 2017 through 2019, draws inspiration from Merrick's life and legacy.



Credit: Phil Skinner

Mj Seneya listens to volunteer Rosemary Schleicher read a book to a group of pre-K and kindergarten students in the Saint Peter Claver Regional Catholic School library. At Saint Peter Claver Regional Catholic School, volunteers tutor and support the students and staff.  
PHIL SKINNER FOR THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

"She is what motivates me to do what I do," Anhut said. "I think of this woman and everything she went through in her life, and then look at my own life and think, surely, I can find a few hours every month to help someone else."



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Merrick's story is one of perseverance and compassion. Born into an affluent Washington, D.C., family, her life changed after a severe fall in her early teens left her paralyzed with Pott's disease, a spinal condition that confined her to a reclining wheelchair. Despite her physical challenges, she began sewing clothes for babies in need and, in 1887, founded the National Christ Child Society. By her death in 1955 at age 88, Merrick had inspired her friends to carry her mission forward by creating multiple chapters across the country. Today, she is recognized by the Catholic Church as a "servant of God," a potential step toward sainthood.





Credit: Phil Skinner

Theresa Lee (birthday hat) laughs as she listens to a volunteer read a book to a group of pre-K and kindergarten students in the Saint Peter Claver Regional Catholic School library. PHIL SKINNER FOR THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

The society has 44 chapters nationwide. The Atlanta chapter's roots trace back to 2003 and a small group of women from St. Jude the Apostle School in Sandy Springs who were eager to serve. Many of the chapter's earliest members were in PTAs together at various Catholic schools, and as their children aged, they wanted to make a difference and not just meet for lunch and tennis, said Karen Frohoff, the chapter's current president.

Some, including chapter co-founder Casey Long, knew of the society's

mission from family. Long's mother and grandmother were in a chapter in Cleveland, Ohio. Long's mother also was a national board member. Officially chartered in 2004, the Atlanta chapter includes members from 10 Catholic parishes but is open to anyone, Anhut said.

### **Focusing on literacy and learning**

Literacy is a priority of the national organization and a cornerstone of the Atlanta chapter's mission, Frohoff, a former educator, said.





Credit: Phil Skinner

Christ Child Society volunteer Casey Long tells a group of pre-K and kindergarten students about the craft they are about to do in the Saint Peter Claver Regional Catholic School library. Volunteers with the nonprofit Christ Child Society help needy children in several ways. PHIL SKINNER FOR THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

“We have been able to put almost 50,000 gently used children’s books into clinics, women’s shelters, food banks, and after-school programs where children can find a book they love and take it home to start a personal library,” Frohoff said.

Volunteers mentor and tutor students at local schools, including Saint Peter Claver Regional Catholic School in Decatur, which serves children from refugee communities.

To combat summer learning loss, the chapter has funded and organized enrichment camps at Saint Peter Claver for several years. These camps ensure students retain academic progress during their breaks, and the chapter covers the salaries of participating teachers.

Chapter members take on a wide range of projects, all tailored to their



interests and availability. For example, for 18 years, some of its volunteers have rocked newborns in the NICU at Grady Hospital, providing much-needed comfort during the earliest days of life.

“CCSA is an organization that will meet its members where they are and work to help them match their skills and desires,” Frohoff said.



Credit: Phil Skinner

Christ Child Society volunteers set up crafts for pre-K and kindergarten students at Saint Peter Claver Regional Catholic School. PHIL SKINNER FOR THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

One of the projects they are most proud of is an organic garden they created at the Elaine Clark Center in Chamblee, which serves children with special needs. Designed as a multi-sensory outdoor classroom, the garden features accessible paths, raised planting beds, musical instruments, and a toddler playground.

Following Merrick's tradition, each chapter is required to make layettes. The Atlanta chapter has assembled over 4,000 newborn layettes filled with essentials such as diapers, onesies, sleepers, socks, swaddles, bibs, hand-knitted caps, and baby books, all wrapped in handmade quilts. The layettes go to prenatal programs such as those at The Hope Center.

Cindy Leary, the center's executive director, said the layettes "are received as the blessings they are intended to be. We value the time and love the Christ Child Society members invest in layettes and lives."

In 2020, chapter members began creating mini-layettes for families with babies in Grady's new NICU units, Long said. They include a coloring book, crayons, and a reading book for any siblings.

"It's all about children," Long said.

### **Expanding the mission**

The nonprofit relies largely on dues from its members and contributions from supporters to operate.

But it still faces challenges. Finding new volunteers and securing free storage space for books, layettes, and other supplies are pressing needs. Members currently store materials in their basements and garages due to the retirement of a previous storage provider.

Building membership is challenging, Long said. "We're one of the best-kept secrets around, and that's surprising because we're the second oldest continually running Catholic charity in the United States behind the St. Vincent Society, she said.



Anhut agreed, adding: "We need more volunteers to expand our mission and continue to meet the needs of our community."

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**Society's Atlanta chapter needs help:** In search of someone willing to provide free office or storage space for books, layettes, and other materials. The person who had been helping retired and moved to be closer to grandchildren. Now, members have had to make space in their basements and garages. — Karen Frohoff, current chapter president

To learn more about how you can help or to join the Christ Child Society of Atlanta, visit the website at [www.christchildatlanta.org](http://www.christchildatlanta.org).